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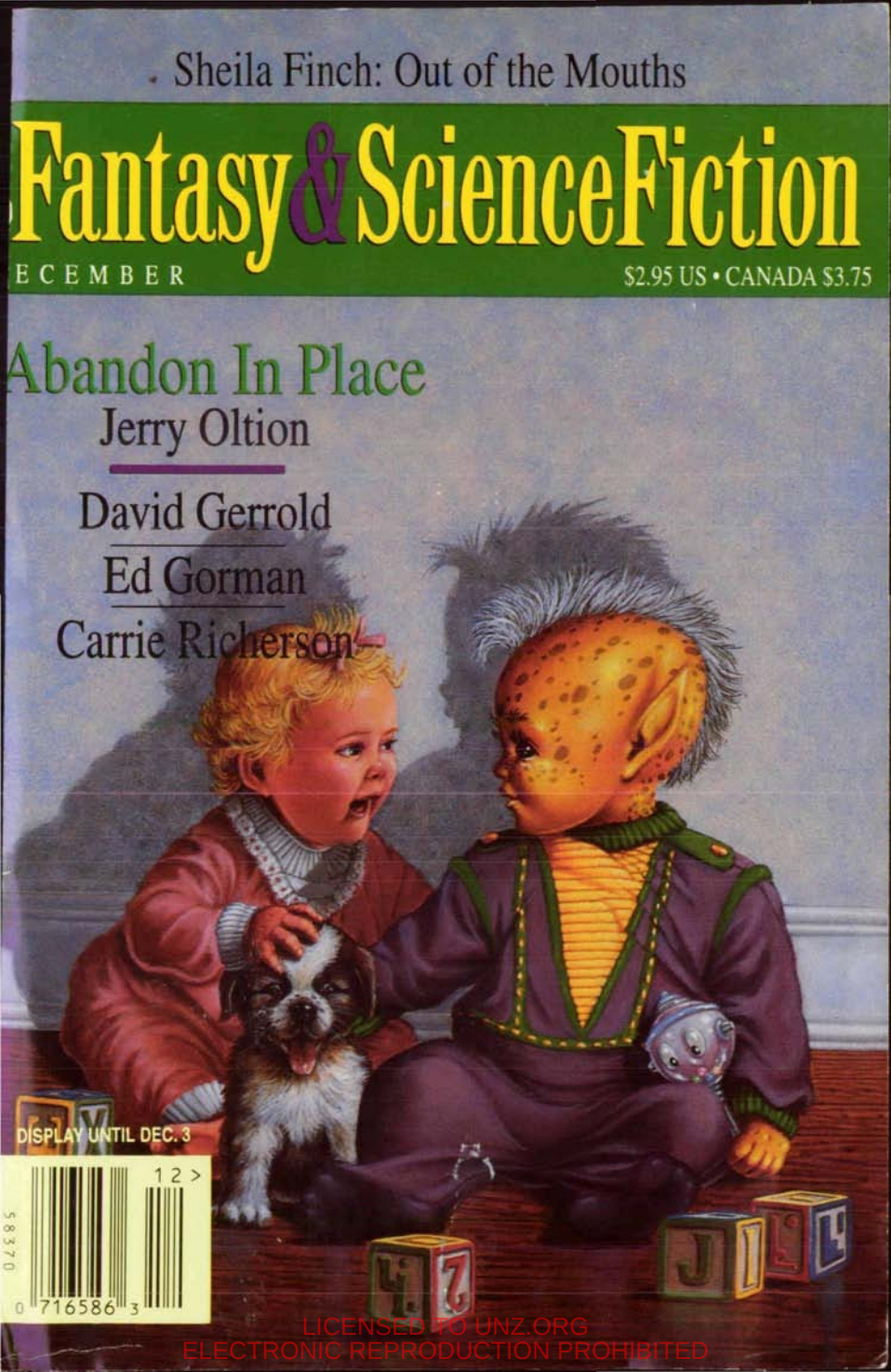

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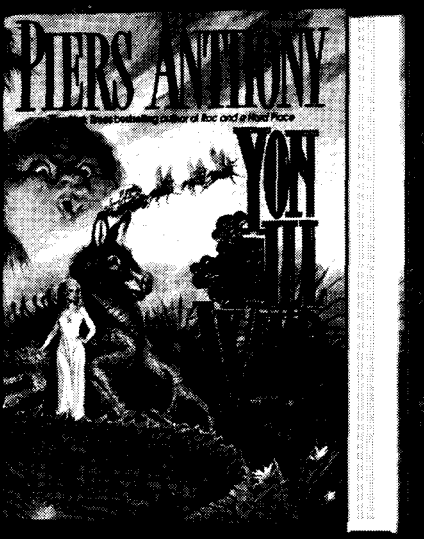

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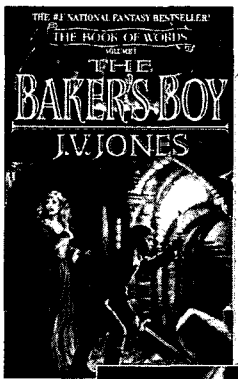

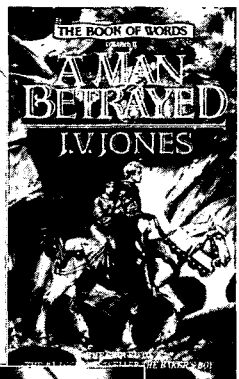

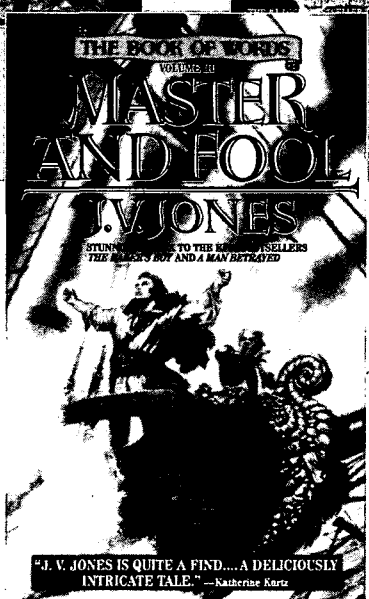

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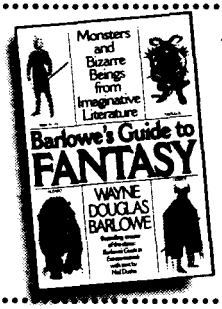

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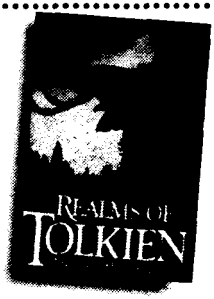

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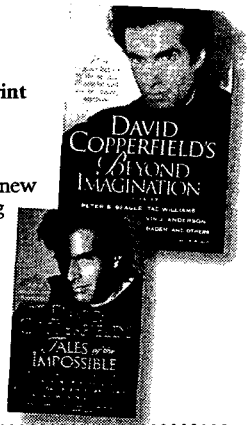

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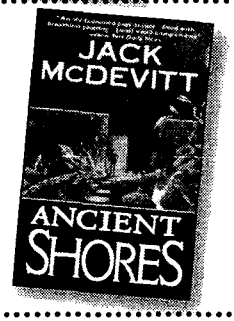

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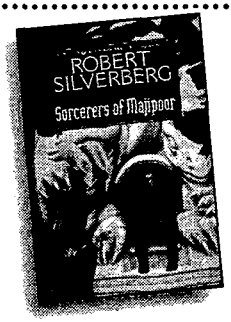

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

SINCE THE July issue, I have done a series of editorials which I am loosely calling "A Reader's Guide to Publishing." I found, as I did the series, that I only scratched the surface of each topic I addressed. Discussing a complicated industry in only about twenty pages is nearly impossible, and of necessity, I've skipped many things. I invited the readers of this magazine to send me letters, so that in this editorial I would cover the things that interested you folks, things I missed.

I received lots of wonderful letters — too many to answer individually. Most commented on their frustrations as book buyers. Others anticipated the September editorial by asking why book prices were so high. Many asked very good questions, which I separated by category and will try to address here. And then a few folks — librarians and booksellers — educated me about their part of the business. (My sincerest thanks. The more I learn, the better I feel.) I will try to excerpt those letters where I can.

The most queries I received were about book clubs. Does buying a book from a book club hurt the writer?

Emphatically, no. A lot of what a writer receives in payment for her book comes out of the contract she and her agent managed to negotiate for that book. Some writers negotiate better deals than other writers do. Which means that some writers earn more from book clubs than other writers do.

That said, writers do benefit from book clubs. Generally speaking, a writer receives a royalty[1] on the bookclub sale. (Sometimes that royalty is paid through the book's initial publisher; sometimes the payment is direct to the author.) Some writers would argue that

[1] A royalty is a percentage of the cover price of each book sold. For example, a typical hardback royalty is ten percent. A typical hardback costs $20. The writer receives $2 for each hardback sold.

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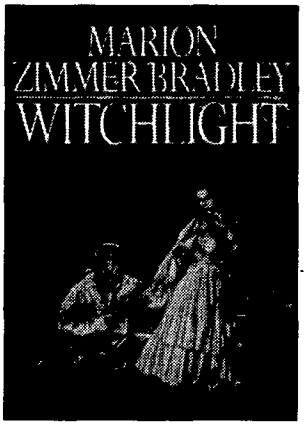

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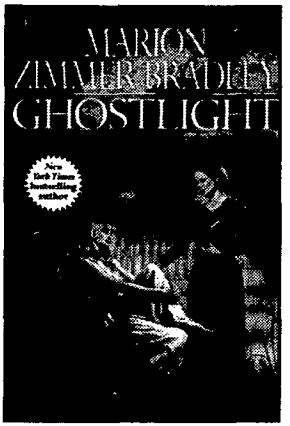

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book club sales hurt because a writer is paid a royalty on a smaller cover price. I disagree. I believe any service which allows a writer to attract a following is a good one.

For example, a number of readers wrote to remind me that most people lack the funds to buy books new. I know. I've been there myself. Used bookstores and libraries serve an important function. They allow readers who can't buy to read and they allow readers with a limited budget to "test" an author before buying his work. A lot of readers commented that they first read an author in the library and went on to buy his later works. That's how the system should work. And for those of you who feel guilty about going into used bookstores, don't. Those books were purchased once. A lot of times, the book is no longer on the bookstore shelves by the time it reaches the used bookstore. The used bookstore might be the only place to find that work. It benefits the writer to have the books in the used store because if readers like that author's work, they may go out and buy the latest in a bookstore specializing in new product.

Several readers asked why don't most novels get published as paperbacks. Why are the majority of novels hardcover?

Actually, the majority of published novels are mass-market paperbacks. You just never read about them. They rarely get reviewed. They appear on the shelves and disappear within the allotted time with only word of mouth to sustain them.

A few people asked why writers start with strong first novels and follow them with works of lesser quality.

Frankly, I think that happens less than one would expect, although there might be a subtle change. A first novel by an unknown writer generally has to be of blow-out quality just to get purchased. The second novel is often under contract. But most book editors don't want a second novel of lesser quality, and won't allow one out. The perception of the new writer has changed. The first novel is usually the introduction of a powerful new voice. By the time the second novel appears, readers are familiar with the voice and so that thrill of discovery is missing from subsequent books. Also, a reader often comes at a first novel with no expectations, and approaches the second novel with high expectations — a situation

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that can lead to disappointment.

Finally[2], a reader left a question at our web site (which is, for those web surfers out there: www.enews.com/magazine/fsf/). He asked, "How large a reader base is required to continue supporting an author?"

Such an excellent question, and one that's impossible to give an easy answer to. The easy answer is this: For a writer to maintain a career, her readership must continue to grow. Each book must sell as well as or better than the last. These are figures impossible for a reader to know. Sometimes they're difficult for a writer to discover. And they vary from writer to writer. A writer who is paid a $5000 advance for a book that is slotted (by the publisher) to sell 20,000 copies does well with 15,000 sales. A writer who is paid a $10,000 advance for a book that is slotted to sell 40,000 copies has done poorly with 15,000 sales. The best thing you as readers can do for your favorite writer is turn other readers onto that writer. Get word of mouth going. It works.[3]

Let me leave you with some excellent parting thoughts from Chris Aylott, co-owner of The Space-Crime Continuum bookstore in Northampton, Massachusetts.[4]

"Your suggestions for keeping a book in stock are excellent, especially the all-important step of telling everyone about a well-loved book. But you left out an important step: patronize bookstores that believe books are more than product

[2]A lot of fledgling writers wrote in, asking how to get published. Since I don't think that topic will appeal to most of our readers, I didn't address it here. But I can't let the question go unanswered. There are two magazines to buy: *The Writer* and *Writer's Digest*. They should answer most of the questions I received. But here's the short version of how to get published: 1) Learn your craft. 2) Write every day. 3) Mail what you write to a market that pays money. 4) Don't let rejection discourage you — all writers get rejected, even big names. The most important point, though, is this: if you want to make a living as a writer, realize that it is *harder* to work in the arts than it is to do almost anything else. You must be disciplined and focused; you must want to do this above all else. If you can be discouraged, then leave the profession now. And if you can't, learn everything you can and then some. Never stop learning. That's the key to longevity — that, and remembering that professional writing is a business first, an art second.

[3]This is the point at which I do what my book editor asked after he started reading these editorials. He wanted you all to know he bought books four and five of my fantasy series, *The Fey*. Which really means that you folks have gone out and bought book two. For that, my editor and I both thank you (very much!).

[4]I wish I could reprint the entire three-page letter since it makes so many good points.

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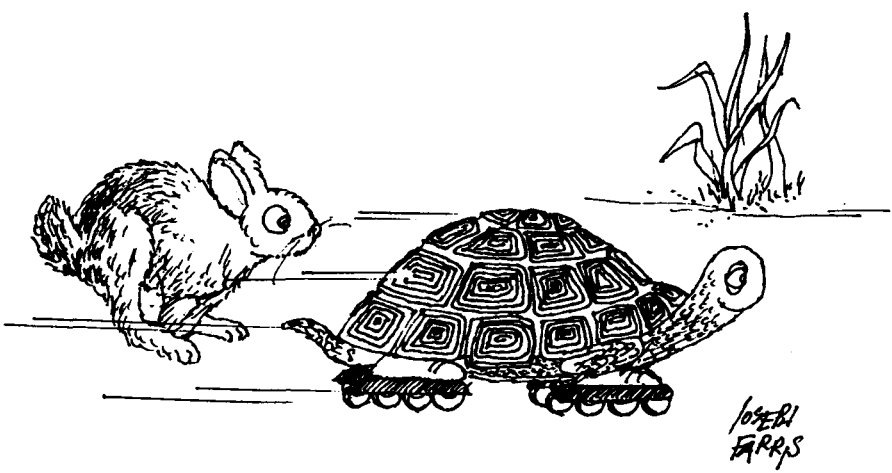
to be left on shelves for a couple of months and discarded. By and large, those bookstores are independents....

"On to returns. I completely agree that the returns system has problems — in fact, your essay points out some areas where it's even worse than we thought. But the returns system is essential even to good booksellers. Not only does it allow us to cushion the occasional mistake, but it allows us to take risks with midlist authors that would not otherwise be prudent....

"The problem with returns is not that you can return books, but that you can return *lots* of books. If I can return everything in my order, then I have no need to buy wisely....[But] if every publisher we work with were to institute a 10% limit on returns (almost none of them have any limit at all...), it would not hurt us in the slightest, and I doubt it would hurt any well-run bookstore. The chains would scream, of course, and be hurt badly by no longer being able to wallow like pigs. But the end result would be better for all of us."

So, let me say to all of you who took the time to write and to send me articles, and to let me know how you felt: thank you. I only wish this series could have been more in depth.



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Sheila Finch's loosely related "lingster" tales have appeared twice before in F&SF. *"A World Waiting" was in our August 1989 issue, and "Communion of Minds" was in our September issue. "Out of the Mouths" is the third, but not the last. It is also the inspiration for Jill Bauman's cover.*

About "Out of the Mouths," Sheila writes, "I'm developing a number of stories about the Guild of Xenolinguists, which sends lingsters all over the Orion Arm of the galaxy, and I'm working through the problems lingsters face and how they apply the Guild's teachings and laws. 'Mouths' brings us back to the Mother House on Earth, and one of the central flaws that arise in the Guild: hubris."

Out of the Mouths

By Sheila Finch

THE OLD MAN WAS WADING, net in hand, tending his fish ponds, when the visitor arrived. He hadn't heard the approach of an aircar. Tattered curls of autumnal mist caught in the low boughs of oak and alder; patches of night darkness still lingered on the estuary beyond the fish ponds; the rich, dark smell of river mud rose like a favorite perfume to his nose. He transferred the net to his left hand and shaded his eyes with the right, bending forward from the waist. *"Heron,"* his students had once called him, affectionately mocking his awkward height. The name had stuck.

"Good morning." A small, brown, middle-aged woman stood on the opposite bank.

There was something clipped and suppressed in her speech; he understood from it that she didn't like him. By his leg, a fish jumped, a gleam of dull gold above gray glass. He watched the ripples spreading, aware the woman watched him.

"Do you know who I am?"

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He sensed the itch of irritation that ran through her words. He studied the woman's face, reading small physical clues that gave the lie to words as he'd taught his students to do. The visitor was unafraid of tough decisions but not blessed with patience. She was annoyed at having to be here. Yet he'd known for a long time that she would come some day.

"You are Magistra Orla Eiluned," he said. "Head of the Mother House of the Guild of Xenolinguists."

The visitor's mouth twitched. "I remember a time when that was your title, and I was a lowly probationer, fresh from a provincial world no one had ever heard of."

"Minska. I'd heard of it."

Orla Eiluned glanced at him. When she spoke, the anger was back underneath her words. "Must we confer across this stinking water? I'm susceptible to the damp in this island, even if you aren't."

He waded out onto the bank where his visitor stood, laid the net aside, and pulled off his hip boots. He led the way up the path to the small cottage. Inside, she gazed around, and he saw it fresh through her eyes: a book-filled room with sloping roof, a long cot under a window and a cooking alcove at the rear. He thought of the ample apartment that had been his at the Mother House, overlooking the lake beneath snow-crowned Alps. He wondered if she'd brought in pictures and rugs and musical instruments of her own, as he had, though he'd brought mostly books. The memory ached this morning.

"Ten years it's been, since you were Head." She turned from a bookshelf, her face in shadow. "Do you miss the Guild, Magister Heron?"

He thought about that for a moment. "The students, perhaps." She was silent while he set tea in pottery mugs on a small table before her. At his gesture, she sat, her eyes reading his face as he had read hers a moment ago.

"You had a reputation as a good Head. It's all the more wonder to me — "

"Keri and T'biak," he said at once, because there could be no other reason. He remembered a sharply clear, end-of-winter morning, and a baby, pink and smooth as a porcelain doll, lying in his arms; he remembered how she'd smelled of milk and petals and innocence.

"Indeed," Orla Eiluned said. "And now the final chapter to this sorry experiment must be written."

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"It was wartime," he said. "We took extraordinary measures for what seemed good enough reason at the moment — "

"The thought of using babies is horrifying, no matter how desperate the times or how noble the purpose!"

He bowed his head and waited.

She sighed, and for a moment seemed to set aside the mantle of her office. They sat quietly, as if they were old country wives, mending threadbare patches with their words, preparing to examine the troubled fabric of the past.

THE HUMAN CHILD had arrived first.

A cold, clear day at the end of winter. Heron stood on the porch of the secluded, centuries-old stone house that Essa had refurbished for them, the child awkwardly draped across his stiff arms. She was three weeks old, an orphan, with a tiny pouty mouth and a fuzz of almost silver hair.

"You act as if this is the first infant you've held!" Essa glanced at him from under a purple wool scarf, a spot of color in a white landscape.

"It is." The Guild discouraged parenthood for lingsters, and he, a dutiful son in the Mother House for the last five decades, had never needed to question its wisdom. But the thought made him ask, "What happened to her parents?"

"Casualties of the war," Essa answered shortly.

"Poor child. Does she have a name?"

"Keri."

Uncontrolled emotion was dangerous for a lingster at work; all his training guarded against being swept away in the storm of strong feelings. *Never let emotion color the interface,* the first rule of the Guild. He could see how that applied here too; becoming sentimental about the baby would lead to inappropriate actions that could jeopardize the project. He gave the infant back to Essa. Yet his arms retained the imprint of her tiny body long after she'd been carried into the house, an odd effect that he noted as dispassionately as he marked the snow softening underfoot as the thaw began.

Essa had found the house in a pine forest on the slopes of a mountain, not so far north that the weather would be a problem, but far enough away

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from the Mother House for privacy. Heron had considered going off-world, but that would create additional difficulties because of the uncertainties of civilian travel due to the war, and he'd bowed to Essa's choice. The house, which had belonged for many generations to a prosperous family, boasted several living rooms, and also bedrooms with wood-burning fireplaces, a feature that had appealed to him in these times of austerity. A large stone-flagged kitchen opened out to a greenhouse and vegetable garden behind the house; that would help keep their costs to a minimum. The fewer times he asked the Guild for money, the fewer awkward questions would be asked. He wanted to avoid the awkward questions.

Essa had filled the house with rocking chairs and antique rugs and handmade quilts, and also with dogs and cats; the children were not to be deprived of the comforts of a normal childhood as she saw it. He didn't argue, though he wondered how animals might contaminate the experiment. He recognized that he needed Essa's warmth as counterweight to his necessarily colder vision.

Three months ago, an ambassador he'd only vaguely known — but whose sister was once Heron's student — had approached him with a proposition, and excitement and apprehension had warred in his blood ever since. The ambassador had reminded him how often he'd mused with his students about such an experiment; war, the ambassador said, often allowed great leaps of scientific knowledge to happen. Why not in Heron's field too?

There was no denying the great need for such an advance. In the centuries since humans had begun to spread out to the worlds of the Orion Arm, they'd never encountered an enemy like the Venatixi. The ambassador told a disturbing tale of a race whose history, customs and intentions toward humans were all unknown, inscrutable; only the trail of destruction and blood they left behind spoke of their fierce enmity. *"If we could crack their language,"* the diplomat said, pacing the floor in Heron's study at the Mother House, *"we could decipher their intentions and frustrate them! The Guild is our only hope."*

But the Guild lacked the nerve to do what had to be done; forcing the issue ran the risk of tearing it apart, perhaps fatally. He would never knowingly do anything to damage the Guild. For the first time in his long career, Heron knew he had to act outside the Guild.

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Odysseus must have felt like this, he thought now, on the porch of the stone house: lured by the twin sirens of duty and intellectual adventure. He would never have agreed to do it for money. It was good that Essa would be the children's ombudsman if they should ever need protection; he understood that some people found him too austere. Questions there might be, in the future, but he didn't want it said he'd been cruel.

A few hours later, the Venatixi infant arrived with a face like a forest god, half fawn, half fox. He'd never seen a Venatixi before, and he was stunned by the child's beauty. He remembered Essa's comment when he'd first asked her to join him: *"They kill like demons, but they look like angels."*

The adult Venatixi male who accompanied the child resembled a vision of human perfection carved by a master sculptor. Taller than Heron, he seemed much younger in spite of his pure white hair. His skin was golden, and his dark eyes seemed to look into the deeps of space from which he had come. If Heron expected to read hostility or defiance in the alien's expression — understandable emotions for an enemy, brought here under who knew what coercion — he was disappointed. The beautiful face was blank. Or else, he thought, the play of Venatixi emotions across the face was too subtle for even a trained lingster to read. He sensed a distance in the alien, vaster than the circumstances of war demanded, or their incompatible languages.

He disliked the man on sight. This unusually strong reaction distressed him; he amended it with logic: What kind of creature delivers its young up to the enemy? How could the Venatixi be sure he didn't plan to torture the child, or even dissect it? And what was the alien's connection with the shadowy ambassador who had set the project in motion and then disappeared?

Heron never found vague unease to be a useful state of mind in which to work; he turned his thoughts back to the project in hand.

The alien attendant made it known the baby was to be called T'biak. Odd, how pointing and naming were used so often among the races of the Arm. But names were all he could be sure of at this point. Ah, but the project would rectify all that in time, he thought, and was flushed with eagerness to begin.

The Venatixi possessed the same organs that in humans facilitated

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speech. No struggling with olfactory cues, or intricate light pulses, or any of the half dozen or so other variations in the way communication was handled around the Arm. Yet he'd observed that the closer an alien's physiology to human, the more subtle the problem of unlocking the language. The temptation was strong to believe too quickly in surface similarities. Humans were lonely creatures, driven on an endless search across the galaxy for soulmates.

Over the years he'd developed a sixth sense for invisible problems, quirks of language that didn't easily slip from one tongue to another, hidden minefields that blew understanding sky high when least expected. The best lingsters sometimes met languages that contained obstacles all their skills couldn't overcome. Venatician appeared to be such a one. He'd studied it as best he could while he was still in the Mother House; lingsters who encountered it around the Arm sent back samples. The language was slippery; as soon as he thought he'd identified words and assigned denotation to them, they slid away, meaning changing under his fingertips even as he worked.

Inglis had retained many homonyms, despite centuries of attempts to standardize and regularize it, but he found Venatician held a more baffling mystery. It would've been daunting if it had occurred between friendly races; with a ferocious enemy like the Venatixi it was monstrous. The war that had resulted — from what? territorial imperatives? xenophobia? misunderstanding? nobody knew — had gone on too long, destroyed too many lives, and now threatened the survival of Earth itself. Time for visionary measures in the search for solutions.

"Did you stop to wonder how the ambassador got hold of an alien child? And so quickly at that!"

Essa had come back to stand beside him on the porch where he'd been gazing at the surrounding forest. She chewed at her under lip, a habit he knew she would've suppressed when she was younger for what it gave away of her inner turmoil.

"Kidnapped him, I suppose."

"You joke, Heron, but I have misgivings."

"Only partly, I'm afraid. Ugly things happen in war. Perhaps he's a hostage of some kind — "

"Where do you get such a terrible idea?"

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"History," he said. "Many tribes in Earth's own past made an exchange of high-ranking children to be brought up in the enemy's camp. A good way to ensure peace between them!"

Essa shuddered.

"But I don't want to know the truth;" he said. "It's a chance to explore a most promising theory, and I'm not about to lose it through needless bureaucracy." His blood began to pound; he felt flushed, giddy with the excitement of setting out in unknown territory, the Marco Polo of language. But he understood she might have misgivings. "Of course, it's natural that you'd feel some uncertainty — "

"More than that. I'm wondering whether we ought to do this at all."

"Keep in mind the great good we're doing for our world."

"How many scientists have said this down the centuries, I wonder, as they raced to damnation?"

He smiled tolerantly at her. Nothing could shake his confidence today. "Essa, you exaggerate the dangers here!"

"Do I?" she said quietly. Beyond where she stood with her back to the forest, the setting sun turned the mountain tops bloodred. "I don't know. But I think perhaps I should've turned you down when you asked me to help. I should've stayed where I was — grounded and safe in the Mother House's library until I retired!"

"In your day in the field, you were one of the best lingsters the Guild ever produced. Your skills are as sharp as ever. I need them."

"I wonder if I need this assault on my ethics."

Impatient with her hesitation, he said, "I can do this, Essa. I *know* I can!"

"Hubris, old friend," she said somberly. "Occupational hazard, I suppose."

But she gave up arguing and went inside.

The experiment he'd designed wasn't a new idea; in fact, early theoretical xenolinguists such as Elgin and Watson had discussed it centuries before. Raise a human child with an alien, and she'll have the other's language in her head from birth, as well as her native tongue. A chance to interface between languages without the programs, the drugs, the implants that lingsters normally used to forge understanding out of

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chaos. The theory had been well thought out long ago. But the opportunity and the resolve had never presented themselves until now.

He had the chance to save human lives from a violent enemy, and expand the boundaries of knowledge at the same time. It was hard to say which was the more compelling.

"Saving lives by sacrificing two innocent children, do you mean?" Orla Eiluned interrupted the old man's story.

He turned stiffly from the window where he'd been staring at the ponds. Sunlight played over the water now, and the fishing birds that had not yet flown south arrived to work their craft on unsuspecting carp. Perhaps, he thought with sudden insight, he devoted his last years to these fish precisely because they had no voices.

There was no point in explaining; she knew it as well as he: human children were born with a template for language, any language. The young of *Homo sapiens* learned second, third, even fourth languages rapidly, easily, while their parents labored over the grammar of a second. But there was more, something seen many times in human history. Nations were thrown together by conquest, or met in shared servitude, their languages mutually unintelligible. Pidgins developed: odd, ungrammatical mixes, bits from here or there to get the adults through the daily task of living and working together.

The next step had to be taken by the second generation, the children who invented the creole, the beginnings of a genuinely new language in the interface between the two their parents spoke. And they did it easily, compulsively, brilliantly. The mystery of how language had come into being was solved: Children were its inventors. Children had spoken those first words in the caves and around the cooking fires.

"You must return with me at once to the Mother House," Orla Eiluned said.

"I don't travel anymore."

"Nevertheless, I insist. There's much at stake." She stood, staring moodily out the window at the gleaming ponds over which a hazy net of insects hung and an occasional turquoise kingfisher flashed through shadow. "Whatever inspired you to retire to this damp island?"

"Solitude and ghosts," the old man said. "This estuary has seen the

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blood of a great nation's birth and passing away. It comforts me to remember how insubstantial human dreams are in the sweep of time."

"And sometimes, how unprincipled?" she suggested.

He shook his head. "Perhaps we ought never allow scientists to play with their toys unsupervised."

The Head frowned as if she wished to argue the point, then thought better of it. "Well — Go on!"

ESSA HAD GIVEN the old stone house a name since he was last here, and the deaf old man who cooked and cleaned for them had carved it and hung it over the door: *Manhattan.*

Heron stopped at the foot of the porch steps and read it. Melting snow dripped off the house's sloping roof, and the wind soughed gently in the pine trees behind him. Beyond, in the clearing, the 'car that was his as Head of the Mother House — a luxury not granted to other people these troubled days — lifted off and went to shelter. Essa watched him, sharp-faced.

"An odd choice," he suggested. "I would have chosen something to do with mountains. Or trees, perhaps."

"You don't recognize the reference?"

He frowned. "I seem to remember something about buying an island — No? That isn't right?"

Essa snorted. "You read the wrong history, my friend!"

He smiled at her as they went inside. "How're they doing?"

"See for yourself."

For three years he'd divided his time between his duties at the Mother House and the children's hideaway, but his heart grew ever more firmly rooted in the stone house. In Geneva the talk was of colonies lost and cities destroyed, the war coming nearer and nearer to Earth itself. The sense of some horror creeping closer day by day, some catastrophe waiting to engulf them all when they were least expecting it, sapped his energy. He found himself glancing anxiously over his shoulder at shadows, jumping at noises, suspicious of strangers until his nerves frayed and he couldn't work. He worried whether there'd even be time to complete the language project, let alone reap any benefits from it. But in this forest he could be

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hopeful, dreaming of the future as if he were as young as his small subjects in a world at peace.

He never spoke of the children or the stone house when he was in Geneva, allowing the Guild Procurators to believe that when he was away he was busy writing his memoirs. When the day came that the project was revealed, he expected they would be displeased at his secrecy, but by then the results would justify his actions.

Essa led him to the well-equipped playroom where the toddlers, almost three years old now, spent most of their day alone in each other's company. He stared through the one-way glass, watching them; they were absorbed with each other, a head of golden curls bending close to one of dark silver. The hidden mikes picked up a steady stream of infant babbling; at the same time the computer recorded and analyzed the proto-speech for replay and reinforcement later.

Ideally, he would have isolated the children from all other human contact, but Essa hadn't allowed that. *"The human child will lose her humanity,"* she'd argued. *"Our culture is transmitted, not inherited. We teach our young to grow up human!"* In any case, there was a flaw in a language produced in total absence of models; even if it should work, the basic problem of interfacing afterwards with existing tongues would still remain.

He listened to the children's voices coming from the speakers, the rising and falling music of baby speech, trying with his practiced ear to catch the tonal variations, the patterns of stress and juncture that should be emerging by now, hinting at the assignment of meaning. They seemed content at their play, and they were obviously healthy — Essa saw to that. If anything, their physical progress seemed accelerated by isolation, not hindered.

He wondered idly if this was how parents felt, watching their offspring at play, a combination of pride and awe and helplessness. The Venatixi child was beautiful, but it seemed to him that little Keri was his equal. She turned now and smiled, perhaps at something T'biak said. But he felt as if she sensed his presence behind the glass wall, and instinctively he smiled back, though she couldn't possibly see him. He knew a sudden, peculiar ache in his heart, and a sadness for which he knew no cause touched him briefly.

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He shook the sensations away and returned his thoughts to the project. The children were not cut off from adult contact altogether, only the language exchanges were limited. His aim was to produce speakers able to move easily back and forth from their native tongues to the creole he expected them to invent in the buffer zone between them. If his theory was correct, that new language would prove to be as rich and full of subtlety as either of the parent tongues, and it would provide the key to communication between humans and the Venatixi that was so desperately needed.

As the project had begun, he'd taken into his confidence two talented members of his faculty at the Mother House, an older man and a young woman, and they'd come to the stone house with him. When the children were fed or bathed, they were taken separately by their adult guardians and spoken to in the languages of their birth. At least, he had to assume that was happening with T'biak, since communication with the Venatixi attendant remained non-existent.

In front of him, as he stared through the one-way glass, he saw the daily working out of a miracle he'd dared to dream. Why, then, didn't he feel more cheerful? Where did this sudden, oppressive sense of loneliness come from today?

"Shall we review the observation notes first, or do you want to listen to the language samples the AI has processed so far?" Essa asked.

He'd almost forgotten her presence, and was glad to turn his attention to the choice. On each of his visits he reviewed the progress, made recommendations, but generally left day to day activities in Essa's capable hands, a task she handled well.

"The samples, of course!" He strode ahead of her to the small room at the back of the house which he used as his study. Essa fed cubes into the computer for him. The AI had analyzed the morphemes it identified in their speech, and assigned probable meaning to the combinations. He settled himself in a comfortable chair behind the desk to listen, familiarizing himself with the sounds at the same time as he studied the tentative Inglis spellings the computer had used for them. He was surprised at how few words the AI confidently identified; somehow he'd expected more by now.

Of course, so much of the verbalizing Keri and T'biak were doing remained baby babble; he knew what could be expected of toddlers, and

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these two were hardly different. A project like this demanded patience and time. He worked until his stomach complained that it was suppertime.

As he was about to leave the study, the young woman staff member came to find him.

"What is it, Birgit?"

"The Venatixi's missing, Magister," she said. "We need him to take T'biak out of the playroom now. The children're hungry and need to be fed."

"Perhaps Merono knows where he is?" The older lingster seemed to have befriended the alien, an action Heron approved but couldn't share.

"I can't find Merono either."

"Have you checked the outbuildings?" Essa asked. The alien never socialized with the other staff when his duties were done, and lived by himself outside the house.

"Empty too. But he's never been missing before! He always takes good care of T'biak."

"Well, let's think this through. The weather's been mild today. Perhaps he's gone for a walk?"

"Perhaps he's gone home to Venatix!" Essa said.

He glanced at her and saw she was only half joking. No one could be really sure if the Venatixi approved of what they were attempting to do here, or even if he understood. He remembered his first suspicions of the man, and Essa's unease over the manner in which T'biak had been found for the project. Perhaps she was right and the alien had tired of his role as a hostage of sorts, and had escaped? But why leave a child of his own race in enemy hands? It wouldn't make sense. At least, he amended, it wouldn't if one were human. And it would be disastrous for the project; they needed the adult Venatixi to teach the boy his own language, or the whole attempt would fail.

He ordered a search of the area around the house and the nearby forest. The days were slowly lengthening as spring approached, but darkness still fell early so far north, and there was very little daylight left. In a drift of snow turning to slush, they found the blood-soaked body of Merono who might one day have succeeded Heron as Head of the Mother House. He looked as if wolves had got him. But no wolf tears off a man's hands.

"Why was he killed?" Birgit wailed. "Merono was never anything but kind to the Venatixi. He was more like a father than a colleague to us all."

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They had to wait for morning to hunt for tracks. No new snow fell overnight, yet they never found any tracks; the Venatixi had disappeared without a trace. All they learned was that the alien had taken his small supply of belongings with him. He wasn't coming back. Perhaps he'd taken his victim's hands with him too, for they were never found either.

Heron returned to the house in a somber mood. He'd lost a gentle, valuable member of his team, victim of a grisly crime, and an indispensable if unlikable alien. He wasn't at all certain what to do next.

Essa waited for him to come in, the sleepy alien boy cradled in her arms. "Now what?" she demanded, voicing his own question.

He shook his head. At that moment he felt overwhelmed with horror at the brutal murder. But he knew an even greater frustration at being blocked so near his goal; such an opportunity would never arise twice in a man's lifetime. Yet there was no way he could succeed without the Venatixi. Everything hung on the children growing up bilingual.

While he hesitated, little Keri came and clasped him about the leg. One of the pups that had attached itself to her whined softly, and she let go of Heron to pick it up. Watching the child cradling the pup, he had a bleak vision of his future: abandoning the project, returning to his sterile, bachelor rooms at the Mother House, knowing he'd never see Keri again.

The thought caught him by surprise; his project lay in ruins and he mourned the loss of contact with a child? That shouldn't have mattered at all. He was ashamed of his sentimental weakness.

"We can't abandon this precious boy," Essa said, absently ruffling the child's silver hair. "But what will we do with him?" Then he saw how to make the best of this, how to salvage something from his ambitious plan.

"We'll keep them both here. We'll work with T'biak — teach him Inglis — "

"No, Heron." Essa shook her head. "Let the children go. It's over."

"I don't accept that. We have too much at stake here!"

"How would teaching T'biak Inglis bring an end to the war? The problem of communicating with his people will still remain."

"Forget that, Essa. Think instead of the new possibilities!" His excitement grew as the new plan unfolded before him. "We have a chance to observe how an alien brain processes human language! A chance to see

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how much truly is due to biogrammar and whether that biogrammar itself varies from race to race."

She didn't seem to be listening. "Poor little orphan!"

"We've had experience with other races learning Inglis, of course." He was thinking aloud now, exploring the dimensions of his idea. "But how much do we really know about how they acquire language in the first place? We accept the concept of Universal Grammar because it's proved serviceable, but we don't really know how it works! Perhaps it's only a useful illusion. If we're ever going to open up the Guild to lingsters from other races, we'll have to know."

Essa wasn't impressed by his argument. "How could we teach him his own heritage? We know so little about the Venatixi!"

"Teach him whatever you'd teach Keri," he said impatiently. "It's that or perish for him. Don't you see?" His face felt flushed and a nervous energy seemed to have taken hold of his hands, which moved in an eager ballet, an emotional sign language that for once was not under his conscious control.

"It's Keri, isn't it?" she said thoughtfully. "Are you quite certain that your motive isn't to keep her here at all cost?"

"Essa! We have a chance to train our first alien-born lingster. Think how the Guild will benefit!"

"And how will we do this — with two less staff? Birgit and I and that senile old cook — I don't owe this much work to the Guild!"

"I'll find you local help with the chores. It won't be as sensational a situation as before — it won't cause as much gossip. And I'll come more often myself," he promised. It seemed very necessary that Essa be persuaded to continue; he valued her support and her intelligence.

She hugged the alien boy to her breast, looking doubtful. "I don't know, Heron — "

"Essa, old friend. Do it for me."

Unconvinced and grumbling, Essa carried T'biak off to bed. Keri trotted behind them, the pup at her heels.

He watched them go. At least she hadn't refused his request. It irritated him that Essa should think he proposed this new direction because he was so concerned with Keri. He was taken with her, yes — she was a pretty child. But obviously his first duty was to salvage something

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from the wreckage of the experiment. Essa herself fussed over the boy like an anxious mother bird; he wasn't convinced the child appreciated so much attention. The one thing he'd come to be certain about the Venatixi was that they didn't experience feelings the same way humans did.

Alone, he sat staring out the window at the mountains through a curtain of melted snow dripping off the roof, and planned the training of an alien lingster to serve the Guild.

"So you blame the Guild for your continuing this unethical experiment?" Orla Eiluned had been watching him intently as he spoke, as if ready to pounce on the first lie he dared to utter. "Of course, you would need to find another scapegoat once the war ended!"

The war had ended as suddenly and as inexplicably as it had begun; but it was an uneasy peace based on incomprehension and there was little room for joy in it. Humans and Venatixi remained as far apart as ever.

Outside his window, a late dragonfly hovered, admiring its own reflection in the glass. He watched until it darted suddenly away in a whir of opal brightness over the fish ponds beyond. There would be no more dragonflies this year.

"No," he said when the iridescent insect was out of sight. "I don't blame the Guild. But there was an urge in me to expand its work, and a pride in doing so. As there must be in every good Head."

She thought about that for a moment. "An 'occupational hazard,' I believe your Essa called it?"

For the first time, she smiled thinly at him.

HE HAD HARDLY ARRIVED back in Geneva when the announcement came of the truce with the Venatixi; for a moment he wondered if T'biak's attendant could have known the news before they did, but that still didn't explain abandoning the child. The ambassador's name featured prominently in the news. It occurred to Heron to wonder why, if the ambassador was capable of arranging a truce now, he'd ever come to Heron about the project in the first place. But as the diplomat never contacted Heron to officially end it, Heron felt justified that he hadn't.

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It was just one more unknown in a whole disturbing catalog of unknown things to do with the Venatixi. Humans had been overdue to meet an alien they would never understand. Yet there'd been moments when he'd thought he pinned something down, captured some essence, stood on the edge of breaking through. Was there truly something to this, or was it only self-delusion?

In spite of his promise to Essa, his visits to the northern hideaway became less frequent; his responsibilities to the students in the Mother House caught up with him. There was a need to find new faculty to train the lingsters increasingly in demand around the Arm once hostilities ended, and more students than ever applied for admission and had to be tested and evaluated and counseled. New buildings had to be planned, and roofs replaced on old ones. Money needed to be found. And the dolphin tutors demanded that they be given more say in the selection of students since they felt they could better evaluate certain areas of expertise than any human faculty committee; it took diplomacy on his part to settle the dispute that resulted.

He visited briefly as often as he could, and in between he looked forward to the regular reports Essa sent, relying on them for details of the children's progress. There was a certain joy to be gained from knowing the children were thriving in their hidden sanctuary. Essa was a perfect caregiver; his presence wasn't necessary — and sometimes that thought bothered him. Alone in his chambers at the Mother House at the end of day, he took his secret knowledge out and turned it over in his mind, enjoying the bitter-sweet memory of Keri.

The thought of her, he sensed, was less dangerous for him than the reality which threatened to undermine his careful life, flooding him with unaccustomed emotion. He began to catch himself at odd moments, brooding over what he'd given up to serve the Guild; the disloyalty of it frightened him.

On the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the project, he returned for a visit after a months-long absence. He set the 'car down in the clearing and saw Keri outside in mild sunshine. He was eager to see her, but a vague apprehension stopped him from calling to her as he'd been about to do. Instead, he stood watching, unnoticed.

Spring this far north was a brief explosion of color and perfume, a

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rebellion against the punishing cold that ruled most of the year. The little girl was playing with chains of tiny wildflowers, and beside her, the dog that had been her constant companion as a pup nursed a litter of her own. He saw she'd decorated the bitch's neck with the same small blooms.

"I taught her how to make daisy chains," Essa said from the doorway.

"Daisies?"

"So unobservant, you are! Do you ever notice anything outside the library and the classroom?"

"When it's important to me," he answered honestly, then became aware she was teasing when he saw her grin. He said ruefully, "I shall be a stuffy old fool in my old age, shan't I?"

Essa indicated the bench outside the door, and they sat comfortably together, old friends watching the young ones at play. The moment of unease he'd experienced faded away.

Then Keri came to him, hands outstretched. The touch of her little fingers in his own suddenly enormous hands started a rush of tears. He still didn't know how to behave. He glanced at his old friend for help and Essa smiled encouragement. He stooped and brushed Keri's soft cheek with his lips.

The result startled all of them. The child drew back instantly, staring at him as if she'd somehow made a mistake and given her hand to a stranger.

Before he had a chance to speculate what had caused Keri's reaction, T'biak trotted up to them, and he immediately forgot Keri's strangeness. The boy opened his small fist and revealed a dead bird — crushed, by the look of its mangled feathers and jutting bones thin as needles.

"Where did you find that dead old thing?" Essa scolded her favorite indulgently, taking the carcass away from him and brushing stray bits of feather and blood off his hand.

He had the unpleasant notion the bird had been alive when the child found it. It was a strange idea, and he had no proof; he decided not to share this with Essa.

The moment of warmth — of *family*, he thought, astonished at the word — passed. He sensed his own withdrawal back into a narrower self that for a brief second had unfurled like the petals in Keri's daisy chains.

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Essa threw the sorry corpse away into undergrowth, and they all went into the house.

Somber now, he moved into the office, anxious to bury himself in work and drive both the uncomfortable suspicions about T'biak and his own disturbing emotions away. A small fire murmured in the grate, filling the room with wood smoke. Birgit entered silently, bringing cubes of the children's progress as she always did on his visits; she fed them into the small terminal on his desk. He sat down at the desk, looking forward to the calm the routine of work brought with it.

Instead of leaving, Birgit stood by the desk.

He looked up. "Is something wrong?"

"Something bothers me, Magister. They still babble a lot together."

"Babble?" He frowned, unwilling to entertain doubts about the project even in this revised version.

"Babies do it. Pre-language. Made-up words. But they should've passed that stage long ago. It's as if they're still inventing their own language. Not Inglis, certainly."

He searched for an explanation. Birgit was a talented lingster and a gifted teacher, not one to come to hasty conclusions, a good counterbalance to Essa's fussy motherliness. If anything, he'd always judged her a little too calm and a bit distant.

"Maybe they're bored?" he suggested.

"You be the judge, Magister."

She left and he turned his attention to the children's language. Almost immediately, he sensed that Birgit was right: something was indeed wrong. It wasn't Inglis that poured from the speaker, nor did it seem to be the proto-language they'd started to invent before the Venatixi attendant disappeared. Yet he could have sworn it wasn't nonsense babbling either. He frowned at the catalogs of nouns and verbs the AI spelled phonetically in Inglis — an already extensive list scrolling up the data screen.

There was a certain murkiness to the computer's translations. Closing his eyes to concentrate, he listened to the high pure voices filling the room. Language was a signal, but this set of signals lacked constants; it had variable referents, moments when the ground underfoot vanished though the children strode confidently ahead. His heart constricted with the pain of being left behind.

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In this queer, sad mood, he realized there was an odd something other present, like something dimly glimpsed in the dark woods outside, sensed rather than recognized. He stopped the voices and glanced quickly at the screen.

"Inglis equivalent for — " He thought for a second, then touched one of the transliterations of the babies' sounds.

The data screen divided and displayed Inglis words — six — ten — a dozen —

"Stop. They can't all be homonyms?" How could they all be equivalencies for the same word? Worse, he saw, some translations were totally opposite to each other. "How can they have made one word mean 'far' and 'near' at the same time? 'Dark' and 'light.' What am I missing?"

And then he knew. Why had it taken so long to see what was happening?

"Run comparison with Venatixi," he ordered.

The AI complied; two columns of collected data flowed over the screen.

"Probability of a match?"

"*Greater than 98 percent.*"

Essa came into the office, having tucked the children in bed. She peered anxiously over his shoulder at the screen. "Does it matter?"

He glanced back at her. She'd always been remarkably protective of her babies. He wondered now if that wasn't a negative attribute, something he should've guarded against.

"Instead of T'biak learning Inglis so we can work with him, Keri's learning Venatixi from him," he said. "That shouldn't be possible. He lacks models for Venatixi."

Essa warmed her hands at the fire. "So? Apparently the Venatixi are born with full language capability. Not just potential like us."

She wasn't surprised, he realized. She'd known this for a long time. Perhaps she'd even been hiding it from him. "What language do they use with you? Come now, Essa. Tell me the truth."

"I know them so well, you see..." She hesitated, stuffing her hands into large pockets in her skirt. "We don't really have to say much to each other to get along at all! It doesn't matter, does it? They're only children, after all."

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But it did matter. And perhaps at this late date he was experiencing the scruples he should've felt all along. Something of the bleak mood he'd experienced earlier on the porch came back. He said stiffly, "The boy will have to go back to his people. I'll do what I should've done before. I'll contact the ambassador."

Essa began to protest, but he waved her objections away and she ran out of the room near to tears.

Before he had a chance to talk himself out of his decision, he instructed the AI to open a channel to Geneva. Within the hour, he received an answer to the query he sent: the ambassador had been accused of treasonable activity with the Venatixi and executed.

Heron was now, by default, the boy's sole guardian.

"And even then," Orla Eiluned noted, her tone heavily sarcastic, "you didn't foresee trouble!"

She stood with one hand on the door of her aircar, waiting. The old man lowered his head. The telling of his story sucked energy from his bones like sap retreating from the leaves and branches of deciduous trees as winter conquered the land. Willow and ash, poplar and elm, the trees of the estuary bloomed and decayed, the rhythm of life. He felt his own December approaching.

"Perhaps, by then, I didn't want to see trouble," he said.

He gazed past the vehicle to the river, shining now in the full light of the low sun, as if he would never see it again and must imprint it on memory. A lone butterfly floated over the surface, and rainbows flashed into being and disappeared again as birds flew up, fish glinting in their beaks. They seemed to know the guardian of the fish was going away, leaving them to poach undisturbed. He didn't begrudge them an occasional fish. It was their nature, and nature made no moral judgments. Some lived and some died; he accepted nature's plan.

She indicated he should enter the 'car. He climbed in slowly, aware of a growing arthritic stiffness in his joints. Somewhere, a lark's song skirled down from the vast sky. It sounded like a funeral dirge.

He'd jeopardized his position at the Mother House by spending so much time away on business he couldn't explain to anyone. The death of

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his faculty member, which he'd managed to smooth over, was brought up again by enemies he hadn't known he'd made in the Guild. During the next year, urgent work kept him in Geneva for weeks, unable to get away. Perhaps, he admitted to himself, there was also fear of the tangle of emotions he experienced whenever he saw Keri. Easier to stay away than deal with them.

A great source of concern was the fact that T'biak grew increasingly alien before his eyes, his moods shifting quickly from light to dark. He was a very beautiful child, even more than Heron's little favorite, yet without her winning charm. But his social interaction with Heron and Essa deteriorated rapidly, and he was given to quick flashes of disapproval when crossed. Not temper, exactly, for there was no heat in them, but Heron could find no name for these outbursts, and he was coming to fear them. Things touched by T'biak ended broken and damaged more often than not — Like the bird, he thought. The child was not yet five years old.

Then one of the house cats disappeared, and this time when he found the mangled corpse under a fir tree he knew who was the killer. He'd managed to cut a little time out of his overloaded schedule to go back to the stone house, and he was prepared to stay for a while; he had a sense of things out of control, coming to a head. So he wasn't surprised to find its front paws had been hacked as if a clumsy attempt had been made to remove them.

Long ago, before she'd been blinded by love, Essa had seen the demon behind the angel eyes of the Venatixi. The uncanny echoes of the killing and mutilation of Merono chilled him even though the day was bright and warm, but he didn't know what to make of them.

The boy came up as he contemplated the body. He watched Heron, his eyes bleak as the mountains that ringed the stone house. Suddenly, Heron had no desire to move the corpse or confront the killer.

It didn't make sense. He accepted by now that the Venatixi language was inherited complete at birth and did not need to be learned from models in the inefficient way of human languages. That seemed plausible, once he thought about it. Birds still chirped even when hand-raised from hatchlings; they didn't have to be taught. Some even inherited their songs. But an entire culture, down to its rituals — and how else was he to

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interpret the mutilated animal than as a child's imitation of what adults do? — was unbelievable.

For several weeks he tried to explain the almost daily oddness the boy manifested as coincidence. *"We see it because we look for it,"* he told Birgit. But he didn't believe that himself. Essa, as usual, would have none of it. *"He's just a child, Heron!"* was her constant refrain.

The summer after the children's fifth anniversary, Keri brought him the mother dog that loved her so warmly. He was in the office, going over accounts with Essa, when the child laid the body tenderly on the desk before him. He didn't need to examine it to know there were no paws at the end of the bloody stumps.

The little girl gazed at him with that pure, cherubic look he'd grown so attached to. It was a game, a mimicry of the adult behavior that had led to the killing of Merono. But he had no idea what the rules were.

He wanted to shout at her. He wanted to weep. He did neither. Angels, he understood now, were as amoral as scientists. Like lingsters, they kept emotion out of the interface.

"What have you done?" Essa exclaimed in horror.

Keri's expression clouded. Without a word, she swept the mangled dog off the desk and carried it outside. He glimpsed T'biak waiting for her under a fir, sunlight striping his cheeks like war paint. It had been some kind of test, he knew. And he'd failed it. His fists clenched with frustration but he did nothing.

Even then he wanted to believe it was a mistake, that T'biak had killed the dog and Keri was only bringing it to them. The language — well, yes, he could believe she could pick that up to the exclusion of her native tongue. But not the culture. That couldn't be transmitted without adult models. Not an entire culture!

Essa rose from her chair, her face white. "It's my fault. I've failed you. I should've seen — "

"Nobody could see this coming, Essa. Don't you think I would've made some provision if I had?"

"We must end it now."

"End it how?"

"Admit to the Guild what we've been doing here. We have no choice now, Heron! They'll find a way to return T'biak to his own people."

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He could see love for the boy at war with fear of him in her expression, and wondered if she saw a similar conflict in his own eyes. "And Keri?"

"You've lost her already, Heron. If it's the last thing you do here, accept the truth!" She ran out of the house.

He knew he should go after her. But instead he sat and stared out the window at the forest where fragile wildflowers bloomed so briefly and birds darted through conifers, nest-building, scraps of fur scavenged from the household cats and dogs in their beaks. He couldn't recall ever noticing them before. So much had changed in the way he viewed the world. Hatched only a year ago, now the birds knew — all untaught — how to seize life's flickering warmth in a year mostly cold and dark. The sheer bravery of tiny things touched his heart.

He ran outside at the sound of the first scream, but he was too late to save Essa. He did, however, manage to prevent T'biak from cutting off her hands.

"The Procurators decided it was better not to let the true story get out," the old man said. "I was allowed to 'retire' from the Guild."

The 'car hummed softly, lifting over the sea to the destination the Head had coded into the onboard AI. After a while she sighed.

"And you exiled yourself on that island, far away from your life's work — "

"As penance, Magistra."

She stirred irritably at his use of the honorific. "There're better ways to make amends than becoming a hermit!"

He felt drained of words, a relief, as if he'd lanced a boil and let infection flow out. After the shock of events had begun to fade, he'd made the decision that he couldn't trust himself ever again. *Hubris,* Essa had called his crime. On his river mouth, where silent fish and noisy birds pursued their instinctual ways, he'd found healing if not forgiveness. For that, one had to pay one's debts, but it had not been possible to pay his.

"Did you ever learn why T'biak killed Essa?"

"I think because she loved him. They can't take too much love."

The Head glanced quizzically at him. "Well, we shall never know. He was returned to his people not long after."

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The 'car was descending now and he recognized the autumnal gold-green dress of the Alps. They skimmed over ripe fields and flag-bedecked towns; in the distance, he saw the white buildings of the Mother House, surrounded by apple orchards. He imagined the shimmer of young voices under the heavy boughs, practicing their craft on each other, their music a reminder of how much he'd loved the Guild and its mission. Everything looked fresher, more prosperous than he remembered. The peace, incomprehensible though it might be, had held; things had improved.

"You don't seem curious to know why I came for you." Orla Eiluned waited for him to answer. When he didn't, she said: "The girl asked for you. You must find out why."

He raised an eyebrow at that.

"Oh yes," she said, misunderstanding. "We've taught Keri Inglis! She learned fast enough once the boy was gone. We have great hopes for her as a superior lingster. Something good will emerge from your abominable experiment, after all."

He saw then how she was like the man he'd once been. It was the Guild itself that bred such ambition in its members, such proud ignorance. He could no more expect her to understand than he had in the beginning.

"I sometimes think Venatician will always remain beyond our reach," she said. "All those years, you made so little progress!"

One homonym, he thought. One connection he was sure of. But he didn't say it to her.

"Keri speaks Inglis. But does she still think in Venatician?"

She glanced sharply at him. "Her attendants say she dreams in it. They hear her talk in her sleep."

"Attendants."

She looked uncomfortable for the first time since she'd come for him. "The girl has had — some problems."

He could imagine what those problems might be. "We teach our culture to our young," he said. "It's not inherited. Not instinctive. I'll never believe that."

"But who's to say which model is learned, and when, or why?" the Head asked. "Young children bond, and the bonds are hard to educate away."

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"And you need me now. Why now?"

"Well — She needs you. You'll see."

The 'car settled on a dark green lawn, folding its wings with a soft flutter. In front of him, he saw the classical lines of familiar buildings: the low roofs of the dolphin hall where the dolphin tutors taught their young pupils the restraint of physiology on concept and philosophy, classrooms where eager voices called and answered, polyphony in a dozen tongues. He'd apprenticed to the Guild at the age of ten, never wanting to be anything other than a lingster. He caught sight of the residence that had been his home when he was Head of the House, and then the library — he still thought of the library as Essa's domain though she'd been dead for a decade. His throat tightened and his eyes stung. The Guild had been his whole life for so many years, yet at its heart he'd found an aching loneliness.

Orla Eiluned touched his arm, urging him toward a building that hadn't existed in his time. Doors opened silently ahead of him and he followed their invitation slowly, down a short corridor and into a small room filled with green plants and a dazzle of sunlight. He blinked and shaded his eyes. The Head waited outside.

Keri stood by the window, her back to the light. She wore a simple white tunic that caught the light and gave her the look of an angel in a medieval illumination. His heart leaped, recognizing her instantly by her presence long before his eyes could adjust and identify her features. When his vision cleared he saw how tall she'd grown in ten years, slim as a willow sapling, a young girl trembling on the edge of full womanhood. Her beauty took his breath away.

Yet there was some indefinable quality under the surface, as if — in spite of the robust health she displayed — she were dying. A bird, he thought in dismay, unable to break its way free of the egg that has nurtured it, would look like that. He understood why the Head had come herself to fetch him.

"My dearest child."

He opened his arms. She flowed into them in one graceful, catlike movement, and he folded her to his chest, feeling the fragile bones under skin as soft as wildflowers. Neither said anything for several moments. Then an embarrassed cough revealed the presence of another woman in the room.

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"Please. Leave us alone."

"Is that wise, Magister Heron?" the woman asked.

"This is my daughter," he said simply, finally bringing himself to claim a bond of the heart if not of the blood.

The attendant looked doubtfully from Heron to Keri and back. But she went out of the room and closed the door behind her.

"You understand why I asked for you?" Keri stepped out of his embrace but kept his wrinkled old hands in her smooth young ones.

He was thrilled by her voice, low and musical like the call of a bright bird on his river. He felt himself rising to its lure. "Yes."

She studied his face. "I cannot be completely free without this rite."

He nodded, understanding. "T'biak too. But earlier?"

"Venatixi males mature faster than females. They need to. Our world is bloodier than yours."

He noted her choice of pronoun without comment; somehow, he wasn't even surprised. Her radiance held him transfixed. Perhaps the carp looking up felt this way as the kingfisher flashed overhead.

Her eyes filled with shadow, and she added: "There is no anger in the act."

"Surely a Guild lingster can understand that!" He smiled at her. "They hope you'll be a great lingster, you know."

She smiled too. "I shall. But not here. I have to go to Venatix."

"And how will you do that?"

"T'biak speaks to me. He is my mate. He'll come for me."

He thought again how much like angels they all were, and who could doubt that such superior beings moved in ways humans could never dream? Or made choices humans never faced. He remembered the way he and Essa and Birgit had searched for the vanished Venatixi in the snow-bound forest after gentle Merono's murder and found no trace. He was an old man now, and such things were easier to believe than when he'd been young.

She lifted his hands and studied them thoughtfully, and the touch of her fingers burned. He tried and failed to suppress a shiver.

"I'm old. I have no regrets. But — my hands — " He broke off. It was irrational. "An old man's whim."

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"Inglis too is full of metaphors about controlling hands," she said gently, letting go. "But I'll grant you them."

She drew him slowly toward her by his arms. His nose filled with her scent of milk and petals, and he thought suddenly of innocence as the river understood it, the cycle of life and death that nature wrote. He couldn't say whether he'd created an angel or a demon, nor did he care. The universe was more complex than the Guild recognized. But the Guild was young; he hoped it would learn.

As her face swelled in his vision, he saw her eyes brimming with love.

"Father," she said.

Love and death, the only Venatician homonym he was certain he understood; they were intimately connected in the languages of Earth too.

He had the sense of a debt paid. He was at peace.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Lunatics, by Bradley Denton, St. Martin's Press, 1996, 325pp, $23.95, Hardcover

AFTER the unfortunate death of his wife, Jack plunged into depression for a year or so, worrying his friends. So you'd think they'd be happy when he finally snaps out of it and gets a girlfriend named Lily. The trouble is, Jack claims Lily is actually the goddess of the moon and they can only be together one night a month. To make it easier for her to find him, Jack has to strip naked and wait for her out-of-doors.

Lunatics opens with Jack being arrested for exposing himself in public. His friends bail him out and, when they realize that he's not going to budge from his fixation on what they perceive as either an imaginary woman or someone who's playing games with Jack and will only see him one night a month, they make monthly treks on the night of the full moon to a cabin Halle owns outside of Austin so that Jack can do his thing without getting arrested.

The problem here is that Lily really is the moon goddess and because of her relationship with Jack, she takes an interest in his friends as well, "helping" them out with their love lives. Soon they're all either having affairs with each others' spouses, angry with each other, or both. At that point Lily becomes nervous about how her relationship with Jack is changing her, so she dumps him, leaving the love lives and relationships of all the friends in crisis.

Denton never takes the obvious route with his books. All you have to do is read *Blackburn* (a very strange take on a serial killer) or *Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede* (a first contact novel which basically defies easy description) to see what I mean. But while his plots range from whimsical to bizarre, and there is invariably an

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undercurrent of humor to how he tells the tale, Denton takes his characters seriously and he writes with great style and compassion.

Here he sets his sights on that most confusing of human emotional states , Love, and gives us a novel that Thorne Smith might have written were he still alive and writing today. Insightful, funny, sexy, *Lunatics* is a wonderful romp of a book from an author who refuses to repeat himself, and whose talent and original vision show no sign of abating.

Beauty, by Susan Wilson, Crown, 1996, 200pp, $16.95, Hardcover

We've spoken before in this column of how readily fairy tales can survive the various hoops we run them through, that the stories themselves are so deeply rooted in our subconscious that they have become archetypes in literature's landscape. So perhaps it's not so surprising that they have proved grist for authors' mills to the extent that they have. What is surprising, however, is how effective these archetypal plots can still be, considering our familiarity with them.

"Beauty and the Beast" can be found in texts as early as Straparola's *Piacevoli Notti* (1550) and has gone on to be a classic B&W film, a television series, a Broadway musical and a Disney-fied feature-length cartoon. On the printed page, Sheri Tepper has written a version of the story, as has Robin McKinley and who knows how many others. So it's a brave author who will tackle it once more.

In Susan Wilson's version, Beauty is Alix Miller, an artist in a family of artists who through the generations have painted portraits of the Crompton family. The Beast is the current Crompton, Leland, last of his line, a mystery writer who lives as a recluse in New Hampshire and suffers from acromegaly which has disfigured his features. The plot plays out with the inevitability of the classic story, yet it retains its potency — not because Wilson has found some fascinating new take on the old story, or simply set it before us in new clothes, but because her characters have so much life that we forget the familiarity of the story and read on because we want to know more about them for who they are, rather than for how they act out the well-known parts they must play.

Her prose is lovely, her characterization — especially the differing yet similar worldviews of an

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artist and an author — is insightful, and she ranges far beyond the basic plot. As much of the book deals with the death of Alix's father from cancer, the sources of creativity for both artists and writers, and what happens beyond the point where the familiar story usually ends.

Because Wilson writes with such a sure hand, her version of Beauty is at once an entirely new tale, and a bittersweet interpretation of the classic.

The Wood Wife, by Terri Windling, Tor Books, 1996, 320pp, $22.95, Hardcover; ISBN 0-312-85988-0

I've been wanting to read this book for a long time. I didn't know what it would be when I read it, but I knew I wanted to read it.

The above requires some explanation, but I'll try to keep it brief. For almost two decades now one of the most striking voices in fantasy has been working behind the scenes as an anthologist — on her own (*Faery!, Elsewhere, The Borderland* series, *The Armless Maiden*) and with Ellen Datlow (*The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, the adult fairy tale series that began with *Snow White, Blood Red*) — and as a book editor (first for Ace, now for Tor).

The thread that binds Windling's editorial work to her own creative vision is an interweaving of impeccable taste and fearlessness. She has never been afraid to search far afield to bring home to us some new treasured find and more than one author in the field is working today because she was willing to champion their work in the editorial boardroom. Like Lin Carter before her, she has long had the knack of finding and nurturing stories that are exactly what readers have been wanting to read, only we didn't know it until she presented them to us.

Now I know there's a school of thought that believes editors are failed writers, but I prefer to think of them as people who love literature and have this, one might almost say, compulsion to share the best of it with us. A good editor will gravitate toward material that reacts with her own sensibilities. And because those sensibilities already exist, as opposed to being some editorial stance that she assumes when she goes into the office, it stands to reason that when she does dip into her own well, the stories she draws forth will share a quality and vision with those she harvests for us from

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the pens of others. But those stories will be a little purer — a little closer to her own vision, because she isn't nurturing the story now, she is creating it.

As an editor, essayist and columnist (she writes a regular column for *Realms of Fantasy*), Windling has brought to my attention more wonderful books and stories than any other one person I can think of. So when I found out that she was finally writing some fiction of her own, my anticipation ran so high that when the poor book finally came into my hands it probably thought it was going to have to work twice as hard as another book, simply to try to meet those expectations.

It shouldn't have worried.

The Wood Wife is the story of Maggie Black, once a poet, now a journalist and biographer, and her attempt to write a biography of Davis Cooper, a reclusive and once-renowned poet, now better known as the widower of the famous artist, Anna Naverra. Many years ago, Black approached Cooper about the biography and he turned her down flat, but they struck up a friendship by way of correspondence. Now, with Cooper's recent and mysterious death, Black has inherited Cooper's property in the Sonoran desert outside Tucson, Arizona, and decides that this is Cooper's tacit way of finally giving her permission.

Black is a city girl and when she moves to Cooper's house, she finds the desert is at once strange and seductive. She soon develops friendships with a few of the locals. They are a Bohemian, yet human group: a bookmaker and her artist husband, a carpenter/musician, a botanist who with her husband runs an animal shelter, a Native mechanic. More disturbing are first the sightings, then the relationships she develops with various mysterious creatures haunting the desert near her new home, impossible beings that previous to this she thought could only exist in the paintings of Naverra and in Cooper's poetry. Some are charming, but others seem dangerous, and Black begins to worry that a mysterious fate such as what befell the previous owners of this property (Naverra went mad and killed herself, Cooper was mysteriously murdered) will be her's as well.

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And thereby hangs the tale.

Unless a book has some really catchy plot that can be abstracted in Hollywoodese ("It's Cinderella meets The Terminator!"), the complexities that make up a good novel are difficult to summarize with any real justice. If it wasn't that way, the author wouldn't have taken a whole novel to tell her tale. By that token, the above plot sketch is certainly part of the book, but there's so much more. The language is gorgeous, lyric in places, spare in others, always just right. The characters are distinct, the relationships between them revealing and truthful. The setting is so well-realized that you can feel the dry heat, the thin air at the mountaintop, the disjointed out-of-place feeling a character gets coming into a metropolitan area after weeks in the desert.

And then there are the myths that underlie the story, at once down-to-earth and soaring with mystery. The explorations of the creative spirit, the muse, and the lack of the same. This is a novel of muscle and tenderness, of sharp edges and great delights. I won't say that it's the best book I've ever read, because I don't like to quantify things in that way, but it's certainly among the most treasured. And I'm already looking forward to reading it again, at a slower pace this time, and losing myself once more in the mythic desert Windling has shared with us in its pages.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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David Gerrold's most recent appearance was "The Martian Child" in the September 1994 issue. "The Martian Child" received the Nebula and Hugo awards for that year. David is no stranger to accolades. Many of his novels are considered classics in the genre. He has also written for a dozen different television series. "The Emperor Redux" is a slightly different take on a very familiar tale.

The Emperor Redux

By David Gerrold

NCE UPON A TIME THERE lived an emperor who loved his people very much. Because he ruled with wisdom, responsibility and compassion, he was much loved in return.

One bright spring day, a pair of tailors came to the palace. To celebrate the emperor's birthday, they would make him the *finest and most beautiful* suit of clothes that had ever been made.

The emperor was no fool. He knew that there are no absolutes in the material universe — especially when it comes to such subjective things as the individual perception of artistic achievement. And he said so to the traveling tailors. "There are no absolutes."

"You are *absolutely* right," agreed the tailors. "If there is even one person in the world who does not see that this is truly the very finest and most beautiful suit of clothes possible, then we will have failed completely. This is quite a problem, yes, but we have solved it, we are certain."

Despite himself, the emperor was intrigued. "Go on," he bade them.

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"We are going to make your suit of clothes out of a cloth so dazzling and radiant that just to look at it will blind you. Naturally, this would be impractical to wear, so we have made the cloth invisible as well."

The emperor nodded thoughtfully. "That makes good sense."

And then the traveling tailors said, "The name of this cloth is *imagination*, Your Majesty." And they unrolled the cloth before him, suggesting that he close his eyes, the better to see it clearly.

And truly, the emperor saw in the space between his eyes and his eyelids a cloth so much finer than any cloth that possibly could have been woven, so sheer of texture that silk was put to shame, so intricate of design, so radiant of color, so perfectly stitched and embroidered, that he was struck speechless with wonder. He had not realized he could envision such finery. He understood at once that the finest suit of clothes ever made could exist only in the minds of the beholders. To even attempt to accomplish it in fact would be to lessen the concept of the absolute with corporeal details.

"Do you understand, Your Majesty? If you were to wear a suit of imagination, you would be wearing the finest suit of clothing ever made."

The emperor was not a particularly vain man, but even so, he could not help thinking of how the marvelous suit of imaginary cloth would look in a parade. Nevertheless, remembering his subjects and the royal treasury and his commitment to rule wisely and responsibly, he asked, "How much will it cost?"

"Ah, that is the very best part of all, Your Majesty. The cloth of imagination costs nothing at all."

The emperor was delighted. "Now this truly is a wonder that I must share with my people. I accept your offer. You may make me a marvelous garment of imagination and I shall wear it in a glorious parade so that all may enjoy it."

On the day that the emperor was to march, every citizen in the kingdom lined the streets of the capital city; they had all come to see the wondrous wonder that cost absolutely nothing at all. But there was one little boy who had not heard the news, or maybe he didn't realize that what he was supposed to see was something that could not be seen, so he said in a voice so thin and high and piping that it could be heard all over the town square, "Gosh, Dad — look! The emperor is bloody starkers!"

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The lad's father, embarrassed, tried to explain to him that this was an imaginary suit, but the child refused to understand. "The emperor is naked!" he insisted. "He's got no clothes at all." And all the people heard, and looked, and saw indeed that the emperor was naked, and they were embarrassed — embarrassed for the child's father. Because the child had proven by his very words that he had no sense of wonder. And in this kingdom the people had a special word to describe those without the sense to wonder; they were called fools. How sad for the poor father.

Only a fool could fail to realize that an emperor never stands naked in front of his subjects without good reason. Even naked, the emperor still wore the finest suit of clothes ever made: the suit that God had given him the day that he was born. And nothing more, no additional adornment could be added to it that would make it any prettier. If anything, adornment would only detract from the majesty of God's creation.

And for those who wanted and needed to see dazzling raiment, the emperor wore the cloth of imagination, a cloth that costs nothing at all and is free to everyone; they need only close their eyes to see a glorious suit of clothes finer than any that the human hand could make.

All the people loved and honored the emperor for having the courage to be naked in the world, without hypocrisy, without pretense, and for respecting the people enough to recognize that each one had his own special vision of the best, needing only a bit of wonder to exercise that vision. He was a very fine emperor indeed.

And the little boy? Well, yes, he really was a fool, for not realizing the beauty of the human body, nor the wonder of the human imagination. He was taken to a home for the bewildered and stuffed full of honey-bread and jam and then tickled till he giggled in delight, because what else can you do with a fool?

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Carrie Richerson made her first professional sale to F&SF *at the beginning of this decade, and she has continued to impress us with her stories ever since. About herself, she writes, "I am living again in Austin, Texas, having been unable to stay away long. During the days I work at the University, where I surreptitiously advise all the math, physics, and astronomy majors to become writers instead. At night I am the trusted sidekick of that blue-eyed Wonder Dog, Jeep. We seek to use our powers only for good."*

About the story, she writes, "This one is dedicated to Dorothy Allison, whose courage and pain, especially as related in the story 'River of Names,' bear witness to the hope that can be won even in the face of horror. Here's to survivors everywhere: May you know peace."

The Harrowing

By Carrie Richerson

LANCE COMES OUT OF THE store, leans over my Harley and vomits over the flash of James Dean on the gas tank. That's Lance for you: His strength is as the strength of ten, because his heart is pure, but that does him no good in situations like this. Here the purity just trips him up, leaves him white-faced and gagging, trying to take the monstrous in and make sense of it.

Me, I know I *can't* make sense of it. I save my metaphysical reflections for later.

"Sorry, Gwen." He makes to straighten up, wiping at his mouth. My leather-clad knuckles take him between the shoulder blades and force him over again. I lean down close to his ear.

"We don't have time for this, Lance, so make sure you get it all out now. You won't get another chance."

He knows I am serious, angry, but not angry at him. He turns my advice over in his mind; I see the effort he makes, remembering what lies

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behind us, behind the upscale, carved-oak doors, the faux stucco walls, the muted jazz. Suddenly he heaves again, and the rest of Kay's excellent quiche and the fine Chardonnay of dinner come up and crown James. I grin without humor into the night. Lance will clean it up later; it will be one of the penances he assigns himself for this night.

The stone gargoyles flanking the small fountain beside the door rise with a gravelly scrape of knees and shake their fists at me. Carriage lamps reflect on blood-stained ivory fangs, on claws that drip. A green vapor of malice hisses from between their jaws.

I point at each in turn, fastening its stony glare with my own. *Down, slime,* I command silently. *You will have your chance later, but do not cross me now.* My other hand remains on Lance's shoulder, comforting now. They are my demons; he is safe from them, cannot even perceive their malevolence. The stone beasts subside with snarls, crouch again, wrap sinewy arms around knees, harden their hearts with hate.

When Lance is truly finished, able to hold his head up like a knight of the fellowship again, we mount the bike and ride back to where we left the others. We've been gone long enough for a fight or two to break out and be settled. Art is nursing a fresh cut on his forearm and Viv is cleaning her butterfly knife; I know the two lovers' proclivities well enough not to assume this happened in anger. The bad boys Garth and Mort are loudly and profanely accusing Kay of cheating at dice; they've goaded the excitable engineer into a red-faced rage that trembles on the verge of explosion. Only Merle is quiet, alone as usual, his nose in a book, as usual.

Lance goes to Kay and calms him, while I shoo Garth and Mort out of the way. I know Kay has steadied when he spots the mess on the hog and sighs regretfully. His own damn fault; he should know by now not to serve up his customary fine cuisine on the night of a quest. Hell, I suggested Taco Bell, though I'm glad now it's not burritos and chili on poor James.

They all kneel in a circle and I draw a floor plan of the store with chalk on the filthy asphalt. Lance settles down to tactics and objectives. He'll be fine now. Battlelight shines through him; he won't get the shakes till after it's all over.

"Bookstore in front, here — " Merle's pointy ears twitch at that and he cranes over Garth's shoulder — "nice books, too. Do as little damage here as possible." Lance's finger taps the drawing. "Only one main door

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in front, but there's an emergency exit through French doors here. Be alert for people trying to get out that way. There's a door into the back marked 'Employees Only' here, and a freight door in the alley here. Kay, you and Garth go down the alley. Cut the phone wire and make sure no one gets out that way. The rest of us go in in this order: myself, Gwen, Mort and Merle into the back; Art and Viv will make a scene up front, get all the legit patrons out and secure our rear. If we're lucky we'll have at least fifteen minutes before the local constabulary is alerted. Any questions?"

Merle is always ready first. He glances at the map once and it's fixed in his head. He has time to finish the page in his book, mark his place and strap it carefully into his saddlebag. He slings the leather bags that carry the tools of his trade across his shoulders like bandoliers. The only other thing he ever carries on these expeditions is a billy, and no one has ever laid a hand on him.

Everyone else checks weapons one last time, looks nervous, does the little things they all do to settle down and guarantee a good night. I'm not immune to the tension. I've pulled my hair back three times already, and when the band breaks and snaps my fingers, I curse so viciously that even Art lifts an eyebrow. Mort grins at me sympathetically and hands me a replacement from his saddlebag. The elastic has glittery silver balls attached and is way too femme for my taste, but I take it with thanks and a mental note to bring some spares of my own next time.

We line up in front of Merle, and with a few deft swipes he applies the glamour to our faces. I look around at a bunch of strangers, but when they start to move I know them, every one. We've all been in this too long to mistake a comrade in arms in the heat of battle.

Garth and Kay take off first, in the anonymous gray delivery van. We give them thirty seconds, then motor slowly toward the store. I wish I could throw up, like Lance, but I didn't eat dinner. And to throw up, something would have to thaw inside, and it's a deep freeze in there.

Always. Almost always.

We stop at a red light, like respectable citizens out for an evening cruise on our respectable Harleys. That's what the other motorists see. They don't see the leathers and the chains and the knives, the burns and scars and tats. But if they did see, we'd be just as anonymous. They would *never* look at our faces.

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There's a full-size fiberglass horse on the sidewalk at the corner; it's the mascot for Sheplers, the trendy western-wear emporium. As we wait for the light to change, the horse suddenly stamps and rears. His hooves lash toward my head, his shoes are spiked and flames pour from his nostrils. I recognize him now: he is one of the Horses of the Sun, who dine on human flesh.

I've got the kickstand down and I'm off the bike with all deliberate speed. I duck in under the hooves, grab the bridle right under his jaw. He throws his head back and rears again, yanking me off my feet, but I ride with it and my weight pulls him back down again. I put my eyes up close to his rolling, baleful one.

Your timing sucks. I spit the voiceless words out and they sizzle at his feet, melting the concrete. The balance of terror has suddenly shifted, and he backs, trying to get away now. *You can have a piece of me later, if you dare.* I punch him, hard enough to bruise my knuckles inside my gauntlets, but he is fiberglass again. I'm back on my bike before the light changes to green. The others haven't noticed a thing.

Then we're back at the store that is bookstore and something else, and the drill starts to click. The gargoyles twitch, but I quell them with a glance. We're through the front door and Lance is slamming through the lock on the "Employees Only" door before the clerk even has his head up, and I hear Art and Viv staging a sudden loud and very trashy argument behind us. Respectable patrons will be bailing out of the store like cockroaches out of a kitchen when you turn on the light — and that's what we're going to do: We're going to turn the light on in this hellhole.

It smells like an insect nest — dank and airless and reeking of corruption. Some beg, the vermin that have a second to see us coming. Others go down without ever knowing why. But the end result is the same: Our mercy is reserved for the victims here, and every adult in the place is responsible. If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. We're a last, desperate solution, and the problems fall like rain before our silenced 9mm semis and the blades that whip through air and windpipes.

We make sure none of the children see, though. They don't need that trauma on top of all the others. Merle goes to work on the injured ones with the medicines and potions in his bags, but there are always a few we

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can't save. Some were dead before we came through the door. Some have been dead for a while, but that didn't stop the games.

Mort is soothing and sedating the children as Merle passes them out of each filthy cubicle. Viv comes in from the front with the clerk and Art's estimate that sirens will blow in less than five. She opens the back door for Garth and the two of them start ferrying limp children into the van. Lance and I take the clerk into one of the empty cubicles.

I have to have one. I can keep the rage in tenuous check, keep the voices of hate down to a dull roar, if I can just have one. The others sometimes need the release too — except for Lance. But he knows what I need and he helps me to get there without flinching, and for that I love him.

Information won't save the clerk, but he gives it to us anyway: names, addresses, patrons, owners, procurers, politicos. His blood is a fountain in which I seek to wash away my sins; his heart is a smoking altar on which I seek to melt the ice in my own. I drink from this chalice, and if I am not healed, at least my wound is made no worse.

Then Art sweeps through and gathers us all up in his great dragon-tattooed arms. Merle entrusts his bike and its precious, book-filled bags to Garth, and rides in the back of the van with the kids. The rest of us are out the door and a mile down Barton Springs Road before Art's PB scanner bleeps that the Man has found the Scene.

At Riverside the van peels off, with Garth and Mort as escorts, while the rest of us head north on I-35's lower deck. Kay and Merle will deliver the children to our safe houses, where they'll get the best medical and psychiatric care our generous donors' money can buy. Even so, some never make it back from the Waste Lands into which their spirits have fled. But some do recover, apparently fully. Children have amazing resilience; sometimes all that is needed is a heaping measure of honorable, respectful love. At least that's the fairy tale we all believe in.

Sometimes, years later, it is given to us to see the fruits of our labors. Mort, the newest member of our circle, was the first child Art ever rescued from a drunken pimp, at the cost of the pimp's neck. Garth escaped from horrors on his own, heard the murmured myths about us, believed and found us. And some come to us whose secret shame is not that they have suffered but that they have not: Lance, and Percy and Elaine, who run our Avalon network of safe houses.

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Art and Viv split off at Manor Road, heading east past the airport. It doesn't take much imagination for me to guess how the rest of the night, and nights ahead, will go for my companions. After the kids are delivered, Mort and Garth will go looking for rough trade. They'll bugger and fist their way across the city; I hope they play safe, but I don't know if they care. Kay will go home to his nice, clean house in West Lake Hills, and scrub himself in his nice, clean bath, and don the dressing gown of yuppiedom again. He'll resume the life of a software engineer and a gourmet cook, fall in love with a new girl every couple of weeks and never be able to make it last past the third date. If it's a good night Art and Viv will lose themselves in a gentle haze of smoke and pills; if it's bad, they'll scream and slash and burn each other, break a nose or a rib, and swear they can't live without each other. It may be true. And Merle will retreat into his books, and an icy isolation that no one can bridge since Gavin killed himself.

But Lance goes home with me.

Home. Far enough out northeast of town for the lights to die down and the neighbors to spread out. I'm shedding leathers as I walk through the door. My naked skin goosebumps from the chill, but it's not as cold as I am inside, so I don't bother to turn on the heat. By the time Lance comes in from garaging the Harley, I have candles lit, Mozart on the CD player, brandy poured, incense smoldering.

I walk toward him with the whip coiled in my hand. It's a new one, one I braided myself; we wore the old one out. He shakes his head in distress. "Gwen, please — you don't have to do this."

He's growing older, my dear, sweet love, as we all are. There are gray hairs among the thick, blond curls, and lines upon his gentle face, but his strength is still as the strength of ten, and his heart is still pure. It's why I need him so, and use him so mercilessly.

"Oh, yes. Yes, I do." His eyes fill but he takes the whip from my hand. He will never understand, and I thank the gods for that, but he will trust me, as always.

I move to the wall, put my hands in the manacles, wait until he reluctantly snaps them shut around my wrists. Braced for the first stroke, I look at the walls covered with drawings of dragons, gryphons, and manticores, and think, *Now. Now is your time.*

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They're there. Twisting off the wall, slithering from the ceiling, pouncing from the corners. The Horse of the Sun joins them, with his breath of flame, and the gargoyles, with bitter fang and razored claw. As the whip whistles down, they're all there: all the pain and rage and hate and fear and shame of my life, for which I do penance.

Pain and rage. Hate and fear. And cold, cold shame.

So very cold. The terms of my life for as far back as I can remember. But the pain makes the cold back off for a little while, and if my flesh burns enough I imagine that maybe the icy core will thaw someday. Every swipe of Lance's mighty arm, every rope of my blood that slings through the air and spatters the walls in demonic patterns, may redeem me, and so I hang on and pay the price in my flesh for all of them: the infants split wide by pricks and bottles and broomsticks; the children bearing children at twelve, or the ones so damaged by rape and torture they will never be able to bear children at all; the boys beaten down into sullen rage, who want only to beat someone else down in turn; the ones on ventilators, brains shaken ajar; the ones who show up in emergency rooms broken or burnt or bruised, without explanation; the ones who cut and scar and burn and hate themselves, without knowing why; the ones who die, because they cannot choose life.

But I fear, in my heart of hearts, that I can never hurt enough to make amends for surviving. ❦

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Ed Gorman is best known as a mystery writer, but he ventures into other genres as well. His F&SF *story "The Face" won a Golden Spur award, given by the Western Writers of America. His novels often cross the border into the supernatural or the unexplained. His most recent novel,* Cage of Night *is reviewed in this issue.*

Ed says that he wrote "Yesterday's Dreams" because "back in my drinking days, when I hung out with theater people, winos and outcasts like myself, I briefly knew a beautiful blind girl who had an almost messianic presence. She ran off with a swaggering hippie con artist and I never saw her again, but I always wanted to write about her and now I finally have."

Yesterday's Dreams

By Ed Gorman

One

1

THERE WAS A LITTLE BOY UP here one day, a soft and fertile spring day, and he said to his mother *listen to the singing, listen to the singing* and she said that's the wind in the trees, honey, that's not singing. But I agreed silently with the little boy. On this slope of hill, when the wind passes through the trees just right, it really does sound like singing, a sweet sad song, and sometimes I imagine that it sings the names of those I come here to see, my wife Susan and my daughters Cindy and Anne.

There was no singing today, not a Chicago hot and Chicago humid August day like this one, August 29 to be exact, Anne's twelfth birthday, or would have been if it all hadn't happened, if the three of them hadn't died.

I brought a few garden tools so I could clean everything up around the headstone, and I brought sunflowers, which Anne had always liked especially.

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I started out the way I usually do, saying prayers, Hail Marys and Our Fathers, but then just sort of talking to them in my mind, and telling them how it's been going since I took early retirement on my forty-eighth birthday, and how the rest of the family is doing, all the aunts and uncles and cousins who had loved so much.

I stayed a couple of hours, spending the last twenty minutes or so watching a bright red family of cardinals building a nest on a low-slung branch nearby.

After I left, I drove over by Wrigley Field, where Susan lived when I first started dating her back in the early 60s, past the theaters where we used to see the romance movies she liked so much, you know, with Sandra Dee and Troy Donahue and people like that, and the dance hall where we saw a very young Jimi Hendrix, long before anybody had ever heard of him, or before anybody knew what to make of him, either.

Then I stopped in a bar and had a couple of Lites, me having started to lose that old boyish figure of mine, and then I stopped by a video rental store and picked up three episodes of "Maverick," James Garner being just about my favorite actor. I'd seen this particular batch before but I never seem to get tired of them.

2

I was supposed to eat dinner at my brother's that night but I canceled because he warned me that his wife Liz had invited one of her church friends along so we could meet. Don't get me wrong. Liz is a nice woman. I like her. But her friends don't appeal to me. They're a lot like Liz, big and purposeful and sure of themselves in ways that aren't always attractive. But then I'm probably not being fair to them. I always end up comparing them to Susan and not many women can stand up to that.

Anyway, I canceled dinner saying I had a sore throat and headache. Liz sounded irritated, and as if she didn't believe me — and she shouldn't have; hell, I was lying — but she finally forced herself to sound civil and say she hoped I got to feeling better.

So here I was at the microwave when the knock on the door came. I was having the Hungry Man minute steak dinner. When you eat enough of these jobbies, you get to know how to kill the worst of the taste on each

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particular dinner. For instance, the chicken dinner can be pretty well covered up with a little mustard on the breast, whereas the beans and franks takes a whole lot of ketchup. As yet I haven't figured out what to do with the fish dinner. No matter what you put on it, and I've tried just about everything, it tastes like it came direct from Lake Erie back when they found all those strange sad sea creatures floating dead on it.

The knock.

I transferred the dinner from the microwave to the plate I had waiting on the table and then I went to the front door.

Funny thing was, when I got the inside door opened, I didn't see anybody, just a purple dusk through the dusty screened-in porch.

Then I heard the sniffle.

"I'm real scared, Mr. Flannery."

She was somewhere between six and eight, a raggedy little white girl in scruffy shirt and jeans. She smelled hot and teary. Her mussed blonde hair looked sweaty.

I looked down and said, "What's the matter, honey?"

"People said you was a cop."

"I used to be a cop, honey."

"Somebody kilt my Daddy."

Being a cop is a little like being a doctor. You have to resist panic not only for your sake but the sake of the others.

"Where is he, sweetheart?"

"Down'n the garage. Somebody shot him. Right here." She tapped her thin little chest and started crying again.

"C'mon, honey, we'll go see."

I grabbed the flashlight I keep next to the front door in the little hutch next to the statue of the Virgin Mary Cindy made me when she was in fourth grade. At first I wasn't sure what it was but she was only too eager to tell me. "It's the Blessed Mother, Dad," sounding as if she had just suspected for the very first time that ole Dad might be a dunce. "Oh, yeah, sure," I said. "That's just what I thought it was." I can still see her smile that day, and how she held her arms out to me.

All these years later, I bent down and picked up a different little girl. But this one wasn't smiling. I held her tight as we went out the door, and just as the screen door slammed she started crying hot and hard into my neck.

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3

In the moonlight and the heat, in the smell of hot car oil and dried dog droppings, the alley was a silver gravel path past neat rows of garbage cans and plump brown plastic bags of garbage for the city trucks come Thursday.

"That one?" I'd say, nodding to the girl I was carrying, who was still crying, and she'd just shake her head and say no not that garage.

We ran nearly to the end of the alley to a small beaten garage that could fit maybe one compact, and she just went hysterical on me, sobbing and kicking her hard little shoes against my legs. "He's in there! He's in there!"

I took her back down two garages and set her on moonlit grass still warm from the afternoon and said you stay there honey right there and don't move all right, and then went back to the little garage at the end of the block and got my flashlight going and found her daddy, who was dead all right, indeed.

I never got used to corpses. In detective stories cops always tell jokes around stiffs because according to the writers this is the only way cops can deal with it all. But I never told jokes and neither did the cops I worked with. If you found kids who were dead, you got mad and wanted to kill somebody right back; but if they were adults you got scared because you saw yourself down there. Like an Irish wake, I guess, the person you're really mourning is yourself.

Whoever shot him must've really hated him.

He had a bullet hole in his trachea, in his shoulder, in his chest and in his groin, most likely his balls.

He wore a white shirt that was soaked with pinkish blood, and dark slacks that smelled of where his bowels had let go. In life he'd probably been a decent enough looking blond guy — dishwater blond, I guess they call it, like his daughter — working class probably, like most of the people in the neighborhood, cheap little wedding ring on his left little finger and a messy dragon tattoo of red and blue on his inside right forearm at the base of his dirty rolled-up sleeve.

I didn't touch him. I didn't even go into the garage where he was propped up against the back bumper of one of the old Kaisers that that crazy millionaire had manufactured right after World War II.

I went back to the girl and said, "Honey, what's your name?"

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She looked up and said, "He's dead, isn't he?"

"Honey, we'll talk about that later. But now I need to know your name and where you live."

"Somebody killed him."

I bent down and touched her cheek. "Honey, what's your name?"

"Sandy."

"What's your last name?"

"Myles."

"What's your Dad's name?"

"David."

"Where do you live?"

She raised a tiny pale arm and pointed. "Over there." She pointed to a house across the alley and two doors down.

"See that house behind us?"

She turned and looked. "Uh-huh."

"I'm going to run in there and call the police and then I'll come right back out. I'll take you in with me if you want to."

"He's dead," she said, and started crying again.

I reached down and scooped her up and carried her up to the house. An old and frightened Polish woman came to the door and opened up only after I told her six different times that I really was Nick Flannery, the ex-cop from down the street, and I really did need to use her phone.

4

A MALE-FEMALE TEAM of uniforms showed up first. I didn't recognize them and vice-versa. They were very young, probably no more than a year out of the Academy.

They reached the garage before I did. Sandy had started crying so hard that she'd thrown up. I'd stayed with her to get her washed and give her a couple of sips of the strawberry pop the old widow offered her.

I left Sandy inside and went out to the alley and when I got to the garage I saw the female inside with her flashlight and the male standing out on the gravel looking at me.

"You're Mr. Flannery?"

"Right."

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"You called in about the murdered man?"

"Yes."

"Dispatcher said the body was in the garage."

"Right. It is."

He gave me a quizzical cop look — the same kind of look I'd given hundreds of drunks, fakers and lunatics during my own career — and said, "Maybe you'd like to show us where the body is then."

"It's not in the garage?"

"Not that we can see."

I took my flashlight and walked into the garage. Several old tires hung on the wall, laced up with silver cobwebbing. You could smell rain and sweet rot in the old wood.

The female officer had stacked three crates on top of each other and was exploring an attic-like shelf made from plywood sheeting.

"Nothing," she said. And then sneezed from the dust.

Heavy tires popped gravel outside. Car doors opened and slammed. I heard the young cop say, "Nothing here. No body we can find."

A familiar voice said, "Like we don't have enough to do already."

I went out and let him see me and he was just as surprised as I figured he'd be.

"Hey," he said, "what're you doing here?"

"I called it in."

"The dead guy?"

"Yeah."

"Then where is he?"

"I don't know."

Hodiak and I had started out as rookies together. I spent my nights with my kids and Hodiak, unmarried, spent his at night school. He got his BA, then his Masters in Criminology. He made detective about seven years before I retired. I hadn't seen him in a while, not since his hair had turned white.

"Let's go in and talk to the little girl," I said.

5

Hodiak spent fifteen minutes with Sandy in the kitchen. By this time, the old woman had fixed her up with more strawberry pop and a small dish

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of ice cream, at least half of which was white and sticky on her face and pink little hands.

She said that she and her Daddy had been walking home from the grocery store, taking the alley as they usually did, when this man appeared and started arguing with her daddy, saying he owed him money and everything, and then the guy got real mad and took out a gun and shot her daddy several times, and then the guy took off running. She cried and cried but she couldn't get her daddy to wake up. He'd managed to crawl into the garage but now he wasn't moving. And that's when she remembered that a cop named Flannery lived down the street — people always told her to run to my place if she ever got in any trouble — and that's how we met.

Hodiak left her in the kitchen and walked me back outside. He took his own flashlight and we went over the garage again.

"There's a lot of blood."

"There sure is," I said.

"So we know he was at least wounded pretty bad."

"He was more than wounded. He was dead."

"Then if he was dead — and believe me, a cop like you, he'd know a dead guy when he saw one — but if he was dead, then where the hell is he?"

I shook my head again.

"No offense, Flannery, but if he was dead then he'd still be here."

"Somebody moved him."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"And why?"

"I don't know that, either."

The uniformed cop came up. His female counterpart was sitting with her car door open filling out a couple forms. "I canceled everything. The ambulance and all."

"Thanks," Hodiak said. "You two start by checking that house over there, where the little girl lives. Then start looking around the neighborhood. He couldn't have gone very far if he was shot up so bad."

The male cop nodded then walked back to the car to tell his partner their instructions.

"No body," Hodiak said. He sounded tired. "It never ends."

I'd been thinking the same thing. "No, it doesn't."

Hodiak shrugged. "Well, there are eight million stories in the Naked

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City, compadre, and this has been one of them." He clapped me on the back. "You get my note, about the funeral?"

"Yeah. Appreciated it."

"Sorry I couldn't make it. Some police convention in Arizona."

"Sounds like tough duty."

He smiled sadly. "Sorry about what happened, Flannery. You had one hell of a nice family. They ever nail anybody yet?"

"Not so far."

I walked him back to his car. The temperature had started to fall suddenly. You could see silver dew on the grass. There was a hint of fall in the air. September and its fiery leaves and harvest moons would be here soon enough.

"You doing all right with your leave and all, Flannery?"

"Pretty good. I do a little security work now and then. Gives me something to do."

He got in his car, started it, rolled the window down. His radio squawked with raspy dispatcher sounds. "I still get out to that old bowling alley couple times a month, see some of the old guys. You know. You should stop out there sometime."

"Maybe I will."

He nodded. "I'll keep you posted on all this. If we hear anything, I mean."

I smiled. "Yeah, if a dead guy checks himself into a hospital, be sure and let me know."

6

OVER THE next week, I walked back up the alley at least twice a day. Disappearing bodies were the stuff of mystery novels, not reality. The odd thing was, the blood tracks didn't leave the garage. He bled a lot while he was propped up against the Kaiser but when he left the garage —

All I could think of was that somebody had wrapped him up in tarpaulin and stashed him in a car trunk.

I suppose I enjoyed it, playing detective. Sure beat flat-footing it all over a busy Saturday afternoon mall in rubber-soled shoes and a uniform

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designed to look like a cop's. I went to Sandy's house several times, each time her neighbors telling me that Sandy was at her aunt's house, but she didn't know the aunt's name or address. Poor little kid, I wondered how she was doing.

Gradually, I gave it up. Hodiak phoned a few times to tell me that they'd had absolutely no leads, and to invite me out to the bowling alley again. And after skipping a few days, I walked to the garage again but found nothing helpful whatsoever.

Autumn came nine days following Sandy knocking on my door. You know how it is in the Midwest. The seasons rarely give warning. They sneak up on you and pounce. I drove to one of the piers and looked at Lake Michigan. When the sky is gray and the temperature face-numbing, there's a kind of bleak majesty to the big international freighters set against the line of horizon. At home, I turned on the heat and put the Lipton iced tea away and hauled out the Ovaltine.

On Tuesday of the following week, just at dusk, I saw Sandy. Or thought I did.

I was on my way back from the grocery store, making the six blocks afternoon walk, when I saw a little girl at the far end of the block. I called out for her and waved but instead of waving back, she seemed to recognize me, and then take off running.

After dinner, I went back up the alley with my flashlight. Checked out the garage. Noted where the blood trail ended. And then raised my eyes and looked at the back of Sandy's house, where a light shone in a small upstairs window, behind heavy drapes drawn tight.

I went over and knocked on the front door. The wind was up, a November wind in mid-September, and you could hear leaves scraping the sidewalk like a witch's fingernails on a blackboard, and hear the lone neighborhood owl cry out lonely in the chilly gloom. No answer. I looked at the curb. A red Honda sat there. I hadn't noticed it on my previous trips over here. I went out to the curb and opened the driver's door and rooted around until I found the registration. No help. Car belonged to one Jessica Williams. Sandy's last name was Myles, her father's name David.

I went around back and tried that. No answer there, either. I tried the doorknob. Locked.

I took a few steps back so I could get a better look up at the window

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where the light had shone. There was no light now. Somebody had turned it off. I sensed somebody watching me from upstairs.

I trained my light on the upstairs window. The curtains fluttered slightly.

Hide and seek. But whoever was up there sure wasn't about to come down. I stood there staring up at the window for a while, wondering who Jessica Williams might be, and where Sandy was and if she was all right.

After awhile I went home and made myself some Ovaltine and found a Randolph Scott western on one of the cable stations and went to bed around midnight. I didn't sleep well. I was too excited about the coming day.

7

I was up at 5:30. I made some instant coffee in the microwave and took it out the door with me. It was overcast and cold enough for frost.

At 5:45 I parked six spaces down the street from Sandy's house. The red Honda was still there. A yellow rental trailer had been added. Sandy, a woman of about thirty, and David Myles, the same man I'd seen dead in the garage, were carrying overloaded cardboard boxes from house to trailer.

I picked up my Smith and Wesson, the one I'd kept from my days in uniform, and got out of the car and walked up to the trailer. Sandy and the woman were inside. Myles was rearranging boxes in one corner of the trailer.

"I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Myles."

He jerked around as if he were going to clip my jaw with his elbow. He wore a shortsleeve shirt. His splotchy red and blue dragon tattoo was easy to see.

"Who the hell are you?"

"You want to talk out here or you want to go inside?"

"You didn't answer my question."

He came at me but he wasn't much good at violence. I grabbed him by the shoulder, turned him around and wrenched his tattooed arm into a hammerlock.

"You leave my daddy alone."

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Sandy was back, scared. She pounded my hip with her tiny fists.

"I don't want to hurt him, honey. I just want to talk to him." I put more pressure on his arm. "Tell her, Myles."

He spoke through gritted teeth. "It'll be all right, sweetheart. You and Jessie just wait inside."

"Jessie's scared, daddy."

"Tell her I'm fine."

I let go of him. "We're just going to talk, honey. See?"

She looked sleepy as she glanced from her father to me. "You won't hurt him no more?"

"I won't, honey. I promise."

"Jessie, she's got a gun, Mr. Flannery, and she could shoot you."

I smiled. "Then I'll be sure to be real careful."

She watched us a little while longer, thinking things she didn't express, or maybe didn't know how to express, and then turned and ran fast back up the walk and steps and inside the house where she called "Jessie! Jessie!"

"You've got a nice daughter."

"Cut the crap. What's this all about?"

He had the sullen dumb good looks of half the grifters you see in prison. "I want to know how you came back from the dead."

"Back from the dead? Gimme a break."

The street was awakening. Cars and trucks and motorcycles rumbled past on the ancient brick streets, and bass speakers announced the day. A boxy white milk truck, the kind you don't see very often anymore, stopped on the far corner and a woman in a white uniform jumped down to the street, walking fast to an apartment house.

"The last time I saw you, Myles, you had four gunshot wounds."

"You're crazy."

"Sandy said she saw a man shoot you."

"Kids make things up."

"Am I making it up about seeing you with four bullet holes?"

"You got the wrong guy, mister. Do I look like somebody who's been shot four times recently?"

Not much I could say to that. I had no idea what I was dealing with here.

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Jessie and Sandy came down the walk, both carrying boxes. Jessie slammed the door behind her. They got the boxes in the trailer then stood watching us. Jessie was pretty in a weary way.

"Who is he?" Jessie said to Myles.

"He's Mr. Flannery," Sandy said. "A cop."

Myles said, "You know what he's trying to tell me?"

"Huh-uh," Jessie said.

"He's trying to tell me that somebody shot me four times a couple of weeks ago."

I bent down to Sandy. "You saw somebody shoot your Dad, didn't you, sweetie?"

Sandy glanced up at Jessica, then at Myles. She shook her head. "No."

Myles said, "You and Jessie get in the car now, honey."

He was leaving. I'd never find out what happened. As the ladies went around and got in the car, I grabbed Myles and said, "I've got your license number. I can get an APB put on you in five minutes."

"What the hell is your problem, man? I'm not hurting nobody. My girlfriend and I got jobs in another city and so we're moving. What's the big deal?"

"You coming back from the dead, that's the big problem. And I wasn't bluffing about that APB."

"Just walk away from him, David," Jessie called. "Just walk back here and get in the car and we'll drive away."

Myles looked confused and exasperated now. "I knew I couldn't get away clean from this."

He did kind of a James Dean thing where he hung his head and kind of muttered to himself. "I told her this'd happen."

"Told who?"

He looked up. Leaned closer. "I gave her my word."

"I still don't know who 'her' is."

"The blind girl. 3117. That pink stucco apartment building halfway down the block."

"What's she got to do with all this?"

"What's she got to do with all this? Who do you think healed me?"

"So you were shot four times?"

He nodded. "Yeah, you got the right guy." He made a face. "It sounds

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crazy but it's the truth. This guy shot me point blank — I owed him a little bit of money — and then all of a sudden I can feel myself dying and then all of a sudden — Well, I woke up and there was this really pretty blind girl, probably eighteen, nineteen, somethin' like that, leaning over me and helping me to my feet."

"What about your wounds?"

He shrugged. "I know how it sounds, but they were all gone. I mean I still had blood all over me but the wounds were all healed. You couldn't even see any scarring. It was just like I'd never been shot."

"And this blind girl did it?"

He nodded. "I guess. I mean, I don't know who else it would've been. She made me promise not to tell anybody and I really feel bad, you know, even telling you. But I guess I didn't have much choice, huh?"

"No, you didn't."

He glanced back at his car. "We've got to get going. Our jobs start tomorrow and we'll be driving all night as it is. Plus I don't want this guy to find out I didn't die. He'd kill me again."

"You know I don't believe you."

He grinned. "That's what I told her, the blind girl. I said, even if I did tell anybody, who'd believe it? Just like you, man. You don't believe it."

He walked back to his car, started it up, the muffler needing some immediate repairs, and took off.

Without quite knowing why, I walked down the block to 3117, the pink stucco apartment house. A bald man in a blue work shirt and tan work pants came whistling out the front door. He swung his black lunch pail in time to a tune I couldn't hear.

I wanted to go over to him and ask him if there was a blind girl in the apartment house who could heal people the way Jesus used to. But I figured the guy would probably think I was just some drunk rambling past.

Two

1

That day, I called Hodiak three times but he wasn't in and I left no message. In the afternoon, I raked leaves in the back yard and then cleaned

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out the west side of the garage. Every once in a while, I'd look over at the back of 3117, the rusty fire stairs that climbed four floors, and all the flower pots people had setting in their rear windows.

In the evening I drove over and parked several spaces away from 3117. I sat there until around 8:00 and then I gave it up and went home and had a Hungry Man I needed both catsup and mustard for. It was a new model and I hadn't figured out how to deal with it yet.

In the morning it rained, and I went back to my post at 3117. I spent three hours there, mostly listening to callers on a talk show arguing about all the new taxes.

I spent the first half of the afternoon at the library checking out more books on Chicago history. These days the past is a lot more restful to contemplate. Chicago was just as violent then as it is now but even the atrocities of yesteryear have a glow about them. Even killers look kinder when you set them back a hundred years or so.

This time I was there twenty minutes when the blind girl came down the steps, her white cane leading the way. She was slender and pretty in a summery blue dress with a blue sweater over her shoulders. She moved with the jerky speed of blind people making their way through a dark universe filled with land mines and booby traps, the white cane her flicking antenna. When she reached the sidewalk, she turned right.

In the next half hour, a strange time when the sun would make an appearance in three minute segments then disappear behind rolling black thunderheads, she went three places — the corner grocery store where she bought a small sack of groceries, the corner pharmacy where she bought something that fit into her grocery sack, and a large stone Catholic church built back in the early part of this century. She stayed in church fifteen minutes, then walked back home.

I parked and got out of the car and was within ten feet of her when a man in his thirties came out of the apartment house door and said, "I wondered where you went. You should've told me you were going somewhere." He had paint daubs all over his T-shirt and there were a few yellow streaks on his jeans. In his hand he held, with surprising delicacy, a paint brush. The kind Degas used; not the sort the Acme House Painting Co. prefers.

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He met her halfway down the walk, took her in his arms and then, for the first time, became aware of me. He had good instincts. I could tell right away he was suspicious. He glared at me then turned away and walked the blind girl inside.

When I got back to my car, I noticed something curious. Four spaces back from where I'd parked was another car, a blue Saab. A man with a dress hat sat inside. He was pulling surveillance and I figured I knew which house he was watching. He caught me looking right away and pulled a paperback up over his face.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who'd heard about the blind girl.

2

"You saw this man yourself?"

"Yes, Father, I did."

"And he was dead?"

"Definitely."

"You couldn't have made a mistake?"

"He'd been shot four times. Including a shot right here." I tapped my throat.

"And then you saw him a few weeks later?"

"Yes."

"And he was alive?"

I nodded.

"And there was no evidence of any wounds?"

"All I could see was his throat but it was clear. No sign of a wound at all."

"This is pretty strange, I sure have to say that."

He was a young priest, thirty-five at most, with the face of an earnest young altar boy who was suddenly old, sitting in a dusty den in a dusty rectory next to the same dusty church where my girls had been baptized and from which, too few years later, they'd been buried. I recalled the first time I'd ever been inside a rectory, how disillusioning it was. In my Catholic boy's mind I'd imagined that priests spent all their time praying and discussing urgent theological matters. But when I came inside that day, I must have been twelve, I saw a Cubs game on TV being watched by

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the Monsignor himself. He wore a T-shirt and smoked a cigar and had a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon balanced in his lap. This was a long way from Jesus and the twelve apostles.

"And the girl?"

"The blind girl," I said.

"You don't know anything about her?"

"No; nothing."

"But the man — Myles — he said she was the one who healed him?"

"That's what he said."

The priest thought for a long moment. "I guess you're asking me if it's possible?"

"Right. I mean, have you ever heard of this before, of healing like this?"

"Oh, sure, I've heard of it. But I've never witnessed it, if that's what you mean. And I have to say, Rome is very skeptical of things like this. Especially these days." He smiled sadly. "Between pedophile priests and the church going broke, we don't need to play a role in a hoax."

"Is that what you think this is?"

"I think it's a possibility."

"With four bullet wounds in him?"

"There have been hoaxes a lot more complex than something like this." The sad smile again. "I'm not being much help, am I?"

"I appreciate you being honest."

"Maybe it's better to just let this go."

"You mean forget it?"

The priest nodded. "You strike me as a man who needs to relax and forget about things for a while. I mean, it wasn't that long ago that your family — Well, you know what I mean."

I stood up, laughed. "I thought you'd call Rome and tell them that you had another Miracle of Fatima on your hands."

He stood up, shook his head. "There are people who say that was a hoax, too."

"Fatima? But hundreds of people said that they saw the Virgin."

"Mass hypnosis. It happens. Look at Hitler."

He walked me to the door. "You ever think of going on a vacation?"

"I've thought about it."

He grinned. "Well, think some more about it, all right?"

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3

Twice that night I drove past 3117. The blue Saab was there both times. He might not be a master of disguise but he sure was dogged.

Later on, sleeping, I got all wound up in the covers and woke myself up. The girls were with me, and their mother, present in the dark room somehow. I had tears in my eyes and I was scared but I wasn't sure of what, and I was so lonely that I needed to be held like a child or a small scared animal. I got up and straightened the covers and lay back down. I slept but when I woke I wasn't rested at all.

At nine that morning, I sat at the kitchen window watching the bright autumn leaves in the gray autumn rain, and saw a tiny wren drenched on the sill, and then I got up and put on my fedora and my rain coat and walked up the soggy alley to the corner where I turned right and walked to the end of the next block.

The blue Saab sat just about where it had been last night. He had the engine running. Probably using his heater. It was cold enough.

I walked back to the alley, then cut in the yard behind 3117. There was a rear door leading down five concrete steps to a laundry room. The air smelled of detergent and heat from the drier.

At the far end of the laundry were five more steps, these leading up to the apartment house proper. I checked the row of twelve mail boxes in the lobby. Everybody was Mr. and Mrs. somebody except for a Vic McRea and Jenny Conners. They lived on the third floor, to the back.

I was starting up the stairs when I heard a male voice two floors above me. "Jenny, you think I like going out in the rain? You think I'd go if I didn't have to?"

The girl said something, but she spoke so softly I couldn't pick it up.

I hurried back to the basement where I stood in the shadows waiting for Vic to pass by.

His steps were heavy on the stairs. Halfway down, he paused. I heard the snick of a match head being struck. The heavy footsteps picked up again.

When he passed me, I saw he was the same young guy who'd given me the big glower yesterday afternoon.

He turned the collar up on his London Fog and went out into the rain.

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I waited ten minutes and then I went upstairs and knocked on the door where the blonde girl lived.

"Yes?" she said from behind the closed door. The hallway carpet was worn to wood in places, and everything smelled of dust.

"There's been an accident, ma'am."

"What?" Panic fluted her voice already.

"A man named Vic McRea. Do you know him?"

"Know him? Why — "

Chains were unchained, locks unlocked.

She was much prettier close up, long blonde hair to her shoulders framing a face both lovely and eager, a child hoping to please. She had dark blue eyes and only when you studied them carefully did they reveal their blindness. She wore a white blouse and blue cardigan sweater, big enough that I suspected it was Vic's, and a pair of jeans that fit her well.

When I got inside the door, I said, "I'm sorry I had to do that to you."

"But you said Vic — "

"I was lying. I'm sorry."

She started to say something but then stopped herself. Then, "You're here to rob me, aren't you? Vic said someday somebody would trick me into opening that door."

"I'm not going to rob you, I just want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About how you can heal people."

She waited a long time before she spoke again. "That's ridiculous, healing people, I mean. Nobody can heal people except God."

"How about if we sit down?"

"Who are you? You scare me."

"My name's Nick Flannery. I used to be a Chicago cop. There's no reason to be afraid of me."

She sighed. "I really have a headache. And anyway, I don't know anything about healing people."

"Please," I said. "Let's sit down."

We sat. She navigated the room quickly, moving over to a green couch as worn as the runner in the hallway.

I took a vinyl recliner that had a cigarette burn in the left arm and several cuts on the right one. The place had the personality of a decent

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motel that had been allowed to deteriorate badly. The air was filled with a kind of weary history. You could hear WWII couples in this room dancing to Glen Miller, and their eager bright offspring, long years later, toking up a joint and listening to Jefferson Airplane.

Jenny was too nervous to sit back. She stayed right on the edge of the couch, her fingers tearing at the edges of a magazine as she spoke. "Why did you come here?"

"I told you."

"The healing thing? But that's crazy."

"I know a man named David Myles. He said you healed him."

"I've never heard of him before."

"I can understand why you wouldn't want people to find out about you."

"I'm just a plain, ordinary person. I'm blind, as you can see, but that's the only difference between me and everybody else."

She tore the magazine edges with quiet fury.

"What happens, people find out about you and you have to run away?"

"What would they find out?"

I sighed. "Jenny, I'm not going to hurt you; I'm not even going to tell anybody about you. But I did see David Myles the night somebody shot him — and then I saw him several days later. There weren't even any scars. It was as if he was never shot."

"Do you really think that somebody could do that — heal somebody that way?"

"Well, somebody did. And the man who was healed said that you were the one who did it."

For the first time she sat back on the couch, as if she were exhausted. She dropped her head slightly and put her hands together in her lap.

After a long silence, I said, "Jenny."

"I wish you'd just leave."

"I want to know the truth, Jenny."

She raised her head. Her beautiful but blind eyes seemed to be looking directly at me. "Why is it so important to you?"

"I — I'm not sure I could explain it so that it'd make any sense."

She said nothing. Just stared.

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"A while back, my wife and two daughters were murdered in a robbery. One of those wrong time-wrong place situations. They happened to be in this store buying some school clothes when this guy came in all coked up. He killed six people in the store." I snuffled up tears. "She was my partner, my wife I mean. I'd never had a partner before. And I really miss her."

"I'm sorry for you — and them. But I still don't see — "

"I'm not sure there's a higher power, Jenny. God or whatever you want to call it. I want to believe but I can't — not most of the time anyway. I kneel down and I close my eyes and I pray as hard as I can but — But then I get self-conscious and I hear my own prayers echo back at me and I think, Hell, I'm just repeating a bunch of mumbo-jumbo I heard when I was a kid. None of it's true. You're born and you die — that's all there is. And that's what I believe, most of the time."

Softly, she said, "That's not all there is. I know it's not, Mr. Flannery."

"That's what I mean, Jenny. Maybe if I could believe in you — well, maybe then I could believe in some kind of higher power — and believe that someday I'll see my wife and daughter again."

"Would you get me a Diet Pepsi?"

"Sure," I said, standing up.

"In the kitchen. In the fridge. And — take your time."

"All right."

"I need some silence. Silence is good for people."

"Yeah — yeah it is."

I took my time getting her the Diet Pepsi, finding a glass and dropping three cubes in it, and then stopping in the bathroom before returning to the living room.

I set glass and can on the coffee table in front of her and filled the glass with fizzing cola.

I went over and sat down. I was careful not to speak.

"I really can't talk to you without Vic being here, Mr. Flannery."

"Who is Vic exactly, anyway?"

"My fiancé."

"I see."

"The way you say that, I take it you don't approve of him."

"It's just that he doesn't look like the kind of guy you'd be with."

She smiled. "That's one thing you learn from being blind, Mr.

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Flannery. You have to learn to see inside because you can't see outside. I don't mean that I'm any kind of mind-reader or anything — but Vic isn't as rough as he seems. Not inside, anyway."

"He knows about your — ability?"

"He knows everything about me that matters, Mr. Flannery, including any special talents I might have." She brought her glass to her lips and sipped cola. "You seem like a very decent man, Mr. Flannery."

"Thank you."

"But I had a very different impression of you when you lied to me at the door," she said. "Vic isn't a bad man."

I laughed. "All right, Vic's an angel. You've convinced me."

"Hardly an angel. He's made mistakes — one very, very bad one in fact. It almost broke us up."

"Can you talk about it?"

She shrugged. "He doesn't have much money. He saw a way to make what he thought was a fortune and he took it." She shrugged again. "There was a man who had a very sick wife and Vic decided to — " She shook her head. "Vic wasn't a very honorable man in that situation."

"He wanted to charge the man money for what you do?"

"It doesn't matter anymore. Vic learned his lesson. He's changed completely now."

"What time will he be back?"

"Probably around three."

"Why don't I call you around four then. All I want is to talk to you. Learn some things about you. It'll help me, I know it will."

I got up and went over to the couch and lifted her hand and held it in mine. "This is very important to me, Jenny."

"I know it is, Mr. Flannery, and I think if I approach Vic in the right way, he'll let me do it."

She brought her other hand over and covered mine. "I'll be waiting for your call."

4

But I wasn't the one who called.

Two hours later, my phone rang and I picked up and a harsh whiskey

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voice said, "You stay god damn away from her, you understand?"

"Who is this?"

"Who is this my ass. You know who it is."

As of course I did.

"You understand me, jerk off?"

"Yeah," I said. "I understand."

"You'd better," he said, and slammed the phone.

5

THAT NIGHT, I watched a couple more "Mavericks" and had a Hungry Man that took a whole lot of mustard. But I was distracted. I just kept thinking about her sweet dignified little face and the great wise peace I felt within her. I wanted to go back and see her some more, ask her more questions about life beyond this one, but there would be Vic, and with Vic there would be a fight, and I would likely hurt him and then she'd never talk to me again, not the way she loved Vic she wouldn't.

A knock came at the door about the time the second "Maverick" ended. I went and opened the door and there she was.

She wore a transparent plastic rain scarf and a white rain coat that looked soaked. The rain had been pounding down for the past three hours. In her right hand, she clutched an umbrella, in her left her white cane.

"I decided to go for a walk," she said, and shrugged. "I just wanted to stop by and apologize for the way Vic talked to you." She started to say something else and then abruptly started crying. "He's got somebody on the side again — and I just needed to talk to somebody."

"C'mon in," I said, and took her around the shoulder and led her into the living room.

In the next fifteen minutes, I hung up her coat to dry, set her wet shoes in front of the small crackling fireplace, got us some Ovaltine and then listened to the problems she was having with Vic. She smelled of rain and perfume that made me sentimental.

She told me about Vic.

Seems every city they moved to, Vic found himself a new girlfriend. The pattern was pretty much the same. At first it would be just a kind of

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dalliance. But then gradually it would get more and more serious. Vic would start staying out later and later. Eventually, he'd start staying out all night. He always had the same excuse. Poker. But she'd never been aware of him winning or losing any appreciable amount so she had no reason to believe his story.

"But he always comes back to you?"

"In his way, I suppose."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"He comes back and makes all kinds of promises but I don't think he means to keep them. He's just biding his time till his next girl."

"I'm sure you don't want to hear this, but maybe you'd be better off without him."

"I love him."

"Trust is a big part of love. For me, anyway. And it sure doesn't sound like you can trust him."

"He's only twenty-nine. Maybe he'll change someday. That's what I keep hoping anyway."

"How's the Ovaltine?"

She smiled. "I haven't had this since I was a little girl at the convent."

"The convent?"

"Well, actually, it was an orphanage but a very small one. There were more nuns than kids. So we always called it the convent."

"Your folks put you there?"

She shook her head, staring into the fireplace. I had to keep reminding myself that she was blind. "I don't know anything about my folks. Nothing at all. I was left with the nuns when I was six days old. That's why — well, that's why I don't know anything about my — gift. I just have it. I don't know how I got it or where it came from. It's just always been there. And maybe it'll go away some day."

"Have you ever talked to a doctor about it?"

"Right after I got out of high school, this was when I was living in New Mexico with a foster family, I went to visit a parapsychologist at the state university. He told me that there's a tradition of psychic healing in nearly every culture, dating back to earliest man and the shaman and the Babas of Africa. He told me there's a man named Dawson in Montana who can 'influence' the course of somebody's illness if not exactly 'heal' it. He also

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said that most of psychic healing is a fraud and that if I ever went public, the press would attack me and discredit me — and that if I ever demonstrated that God used me to heal others — well, I'd be a freak all my life and I'd never be left alone.

"The thing we talked about this afternoon, when Vic tried to 'rent' me to the rich man with the sick wife?"

"Right."

"That proved just what the parapsychologist told me. How they'd never let me alone. When I found out that Vic was asking the rich man for money, I got furious and told the rich man that I would try and help his wife but that I didn't want any money at all. Then Vic got furious."

"You helped her?"

She shook her head. "She was so sick. I just couldn't believe that Vic would do anything like that. I was able to help her. I thanked God I could do it. But it didn't end there. The rich man saw a way to get even richer. What if I worked for him and he sold my services to the highest bidder? That's what he wanted to do. Vic and I ran away. That was four months ago. The rich man probably has people looking for us. I just wanted to hide out when we got here. But six weeks ago, I saw a boy hit by a car and I went out and helped mend his leg. And his mother knew what I was doing. She started telling people around the neighborhood. The mother ran up here and told me about David Myles being shot."

"So what's next?"

A sad smile. "I guess I just wait for Vic to get over his latest crush."

There was no point in my railing about Vic again. She'd just get defensive. "How's the Ovaltine?"

"The Ovaltine's fine. But I sense that you're not."

"I'm all right."

"You mentioned your wife and daughters were killed."

"Yes."

"Why don't you come over and sit next to me?" This time the smile was bright. "I promise I won't make a pass at you."

"That wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, you know."

I went over and sat next to her on the couch. And I told her about my wife and kids, not their dying but their living. How Susan had gone back and gotten her BA in English at night and had planned to get her teaching

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certificate; how we bought a horse for Cindy on her eighth birthday and kept "Lady" out in a stable in the farmlands; how Anne was a very gifted ballet dancer, and how her teachers talked of her going to New York to study when she reached ninth grade. And a lot of other things, too, the odds and ends that make up family life, the birthday parties when Daddy dresses up in silly hats, the puppie who poops everywhere, the vacation to Yellowstone, the terrifying weekend when Susan found a lump on her breast but it proved to be nothing serious, the times when I found myself falling in love all over again with my wife, the life we planned for when the girls grew up and left home.

I must have talked for an hour. She spoke only rarely, and then little more than a word or two to indicate that she was still paying full attention. At first I tried to stop myself from crying but somehow with her I wasn't ashamed, and so when I was overcome by my terrible loss and the great sorrow that had followed, I cried, full and open.

During this time, we never touched, no consoling hands, no reassuring pats.

When I was done, I was exhausted. I put my head back and closed my eyes and she said, "Just stay like that. I want to help you."

I wasn't sure what she was talking about. No broken bones, no illness that I knew of, where I was concerned.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her situate herself pretty much as I had, leaning her head against the back of the couch, closing her eyes.

She felt around the open space between us until she found my hand.

"This will probably scare you a little bit at first but just give in to it, all right? Close your eyes now."

I closed my eyes.

There was a minute or two of absolute self-conscious silence. I felt the way I did when I prayed sometimes, that I was performing a charade, hurling pathetic words into the cosmic and uncaring darkness.

And then I felt it.

A few years ago, I had a hospital exam where the doctor gave me a shot of valium. I couldn't even count backwards from ten before a great roaring sense of well-being overcame me. The nervous, anxious person I was too often was gone, replaced by this beatific man of inner peace.

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I felt this now, though a hundred times more, as I sat on the couch next to Jenny, and when I saw Susan and the kids I cried, yes, but they were tears of joy, celebrating all the sunny days and gentle nights and faithful love we'd shared for so many years.

I don't know how long it was before I felt Jenny's hand leave me, I just knew that I never wanted to come back to reality. I wanted to be in college again with Susan, and in the delivery room when Anne came along, and watching Cindy wobble down the block on her bike the day we took the training wheels off. So much to remember...

"I'm sorry," Jenny said. "I need to get back in case Vic gets home early."

"I don't know what you did there, on the couch I mean, but — "

She touched my cheek, her blind eyes seeming to search my face. "You're a decent man. You should take comfort from that."

I stood up, helped her up. "I'm walking you back. And no arguments. This isn't the neighborhood it used to be. It's not real safe."

6

This late at night, ten o'clock, lights were out in most houses, and the night air smelled of cold rain.

For a time we walked without saying anything. Then I said, "How'd you learn to do that?"

"To make you feel better?"

"Uh-huh."

She wasn't using her cane. She had her arm tucked through mine. It felt good.

"A few years ago, I visited this friend of mine in the hospital. Down the hall from her was this man dying of cancer. He was very angry and very frightened. And he was very abusive to the nurses. When I passed by his door one day, I heard him weeping. I'd never heard anybody cry like that before. I went in to his room and went over and took his hand and I felt this — energy — I don't know how else to describe it — this great warm feeling in me that I was able to transfer to him simply by holding his hand. I didn't help him with his disease at all — he was in his early nineties and it was his time to go, I suppose — but I did comfort him. He died peacefully a few weeks later."

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"And since then — ?"

"Since then, when I sense that somebody's in great pain, I try to help them."

"You're quite a woman."

She laughed. "Oh, yes, I'm a regular role model. I'm blind and I'm broke and I have a fiancé who keeps stepping out on me."

"But your gift. You — "

"Not 'my' gift. God's gift. You asked me if I believed there was some plane of reality beyond ours. Yes, I believe there is. I mean, I'm not sure it's 'God' as we think of him but there's something out there, a place where we survive what we think of as death. And whatever that force is, it's chosen to use me as one of its tools. I'm sure there are a lot more people like me in the world, all hiding out, all afraid of any exposure because they don't want to be treated like freaks."

We reached her corner.

"It smells so clean. The wind and the rain," she said.

I saw the blue Saab parked a few spaces from her apartment house. I thought of what she told me about the rich man trying to find her.

I took her arm a little tighter.

"Is everything all right? You seem tense all of a sudden."

"I just don't want you to get blown away in this wind."

The man in the Saab shrunk down some.

We reached her apartment house. By now I knew what I needed to do.

I walked her to the door.

"This is sort of like a date, isn't it? Walking me to the door, saying good night." She leaned forward and kissed me on the chin. She smiled. "I meant to kiss you on the cheek. Bad aim."

"I really want to thank you for — "

"I'm the one who should be grateful. I had a very nice time tonight."

She turned and opened the door. "Good night."

"Good night," I said.

I watched through the glass door as she climbed the steps, her white cane leading the way.

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7

Ten minutes later I slid my car into the last space on Jenny's block. The blue Saab was still there. I wanted to see where he went after leaving here.

Thirty-five minutes later, his headlights came on and he drove away. I let him get to the corner and then I went after him, staying a half block away. With so little traffic at night, following him was not easy.

He took the Dan Ryan. If he was aware of me, he didn't let on. Fifteen minutes later, he took the exit he'd been looking for, and drove over to a motel that sat on the east edge of a grim little strip mall.

He pulled up to his room and went inside. The lights were already on. He stayed twenty minutes. When he came out, another man accompanied him. The man carried a small black leather doctor's bag.

I gave them ten minutes before I went up to the door and put some of my old Burglary knowledge to work. A cop picks up a lot of skills in the course of his career.

The room smelled of stale cigarette smoke and the moist walls of the shower stall. I used a flashlight to go through three different suitcases and a bureau full of drawers. The red eye of the answering machine blinked, signaling a message had been left. It must have come in between the time they left the room and I entered.

I went over and picked up the receiver and dialed the operator. "Yes?"

"There's a message for you, Mr. Banyon."

"Yes."

"From a man named Vic. He said things won't be ready till eleven. That's all he said."

"I appreciate that." According to my watch, it was 10:30. I had a terrible feeling that I knew what was going on here. I just hoped I wasn't too late.

8

Twenty-five minutes later, I pulled into the same space I'd used earlier that night.

The blue Saab was in place.

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I saw Vic helping Jenny out the door.

She didn't know that anything was wrong. She loved Vic and trusted him and if he suggested that they go for a late-night stroll, or maybe plant themselves in the Chicago-style pizzeria around the block, why that would be just fine with her.

Vic led her to the sidewalk just as the two men were leaving the Saab. The second man had lost his black leather bag but he seemed to be carrying something with great delicacy in his black gloved fingers.

I had to move fast to reach them just as they reached Jenny and Vic. Cold mist whipped my face in the dark windy night.

When I reached them, I saw what the man held in his hand. A hypodermic needle. He was going to drug Jenny.

"Jenny!" I said.

They had been so intent on what they were doing that they didn't notice me until now.

"Who is this?" the man with the needle said. He spoke in a European accent, German maybe. Then, "Quickly, give me her arm!" he said to Vic.

Vic pushed Jenny forward.

I had my Smith and Wesson in hand and I said, "Stop right there. I mean everybody."

The man with the needle held Jenny's arm. He could easily jab her with the needle and accomplish his task. I put the gun barrel inside his ear.

"Drop the needle."

"You have no business here," said the other man, in an identical accent.

Both men looked at Vic.

"Who is this?" the man with the needle asked.

"Some clown; some ex-cop. He's nobody."

"Perhaps you haven't noticed, my friend," said the other man, "but he has a gun."

"He's no friend of yours, Jenny," Vic said. "You have to trust me. These men are going to help us."

"It's the rich man, isn't it? That's who they're working for."

"We just got off to a bad start, Jenny. With him, I mean. He wants to help us, put us in a nice new home and have some doctors study you — but privately, so nobody else will know."

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Silently, she raised his hand, felt through the darkness for his face. When she found his cheek, she said, "They paid you to help them, didn't they, Vic?"

"I never claimed I was an angel, Jenny."

"No. But you did claim you loved me."

I was caught up enough in their words that I didn't hear the driver take two steps to my right and then bring down a blackjack with considerable force on the back of my head.

I heard Jenny scream, and somebody clamp his hand over her mouth, and feet scuffle on the rainy sidewalk. I smelled autumn and cold and night; and then I just smelled darkness.

I didn't go all the way down, just to my knees, and I quickly started reviving myself, forcing myself to take deep breaths, forcing my eyes to focus. There was blood on the back of my neck but not much and not serious.

Car doors opened and slammed; the Saab, I knew. They'd left the motor running and when the doors opened I heard a Frank Sinatra song. Briefly.

Then they were gone.

9

I was starting the long and painful process of standing up when I heard somebody nearby moaning.

Vic was propped up against a tree. They must have hit him very hard in the seconds when I was unconscious. Blood streamed down his face from a wound on top of his skull.

I stood up and wobbled over to him.

"Where did they take her?"

"Can't you see I'm bleeding, man? Maybe I have a concussion or something."

I kicked him in the ribs, and a lot harder than was necessary, I suppose.

This time he didn't moan, he cried. "Shit, man, I just wanted a little money and the whole goddamned thing went wrong." He looked up at me with puppy dog eyes. I wanted to kick him even harder. "They didn't even

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pay me, man. They didn't even keep their word."

I reached down and yanked him to his feet. It took me five good shoves to get him to my car. He started crying again when I opened the door and pushed him inside.

I got behind the wheel. "Where're we going?"

"You think I'm gonna tell you? They'll kill me, man."

"Yeah, well I'll kill you first so you'd better keep that in mind."

I gave him a hard slap directly across the mouth to make my point.

He started crying again. Only now did I realize he was all coked up. Everything was probably very crazy to him, fast and spooky. "You probably don't think I care about her, do you?"

"Vic, I want to know where they took her."

"I was gonna give her half the money. I really was. I mean, I really *like* Jenny. She's marriage material, man. It's just that right now I'm not ready — "

This slap cut his mouth so that blood trickled out. He put his head down and sobbed.

I didn't want to feel sorry for him but I couldn't help myself. "Vic, just tell me where they took her. This may come as a surprise, but I really don't enjoy slapping you."

He tilted his head in my direction and laughed. "You could've fooled me."

I laughed, too. "Vic, you're out of your league, don't you understand that?"

He shrugged, daubing at the blood in the corner of his mouth. "That's what Jenny always says. That I'm out of my league." He shook his head. "What a miserable bastard I am."

"Right now I wouldn't disagree."

He sighed. "They're taking her to their Lear jet. We'd better hurry."

I knew the airport he named.

10

On the way, he said, "Maybe she's an angel."

"What?"

I was driving fast but allowing for the wet streets.

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"An angel. From heaven, you know. I mean, maybe that's what Jenny is. Maybe that's why she can heal people."

"Maybe," I said, having no idea what else to say, and being embarrassed by talking about angels.

The airport was toward Waukegan. The rain had started again and the dark rolling Midwestern night made the few lights on seem distant and frail, like desperate prayers no one hears.

"Or a Martian," Vic said. He had a handkerchief and he kept daubing his lips.

"A Martian?"

"Yeah, I don't mean from Mars necessarily but from outer space, anyway. I saw this 'Star Trek' deal once where they found this girl who could heal people. I think she was a Klingon."

"I thought Klingons were the bad guys," I said. "At least that's what my two daughters used to tell me."

"Yeah? Well, maybe there were some good Klingons they didn't know about."

What could I say?

IN THE RAIN and the gloom, the small airport had the look of a concentration camp about it. The cyclone fencing, the mercury vapor lights, the signs indicating that attack dogs were on the prowl—nice friendly place.

I pulled up to the gate and flashed the badge I knew I shouldn't be carrying.

"Some problem?" the uniformed guard said.

"Not sure yet."

"You'd better check in with the office before you do anything."

"Fine."

He nodded and waved me through.

I didn't check with the office. I drove straight out to the landing strip.

"There," he said.

The Lear jet was fired up and just getting ready to go. The passenger door was still open. Apparently not everybody was aboard.

I swung the car wide so that we came around from behind the graceful white plane.

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I pulled around to the front, parking in front of the wheels, and got out. Vic was a few minutes behind me.

"I don't want to get in anything with guns'n shit, man. I mean, that's not my style."

"I just want to get Jenny away from them."

"They're bad dudes, man. They really are."

I saw the man with the doctor's bag walking across the tarmac to the Lear jet. We were hiding behind the car. I didn't think he saw us.

I moved fast, running toward him so that there was no chance for him to get away.

He tried, of course, turning around and running in a bulky way back toward the office.

I got him by the collar and spun him around. He smelled of expensive cologne.

"Let's go get Jenny."

"There are six people aboard that plane," he said in his European accent. "The odds aren't very good in your favor." He glared at Vic and shook his head. "And certainly this lounge lizard will be no help to you."

"Let's go," I said, putting the gun into his ribs.

The three of us walked to the plane.

We climbed the stairs and went inside where two men in black turtlenecks and black Levis held Mausers on us.

"I want Jenny," I said.

"Not going to happen, babe," said Mauser number one. "Hand over the doc and we'll let you go."

Vic said, "They got us, man. Just let them have the doc."

"Where's Jenny?" I said.

"Here," she said, and appeared in the doorway behind the Mauser twins.

"Are you all right?" I said.

"So far."

They hadn't drugged her, probably deciding they didn't need to. Her clothes were wrinkled and her hair was mussed. Her mouth was drawn tight. She was scared.

The doc made his move, then, and it was a bad move. He tried to jerk free of me and when he did, the Mauser twins, who had been trained for

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split-second action, opened fire, no doubt figuring they would hit me instead of him.

But they hit the doc, and several times, and right in the chest.

Vic dove left, I dove right.

After the first burst, the Mauser twins quit firing so they could assess the damage.

"Oh, God, babe," said one Mauser twin to the other, "we shot the doc."

"The old man is going to kill us," the second Mauser twin said.

By then, the shooting over, the pilot and co-pilot had drifted up to the front of the plane. So did the stake-out driver.

They all stood around and looked down at the doc. He was dying. He was already an ashen color, his breathing in tattered gasps.

"Man," said one Mauser twin to the other. "You really got our tit in the wringer."

"Me? Listen, babe, that was your bullet, not mine."

Jenny stepped forward, saying, "I would appreciate it if everybody would leave this plane."

"What's that supposed to mean?" said the first Mauser twin.

The stake-out driver said, "It means just what she said." With the doc down, he was apparently the man in charge. "I want everybody off this plane."

11

Took twenty minutes, during which all of us stood on the tarmac in the mist and fog. The Mauser Twins went and got coffee for everybody from a vending machine.

Vic, pacing around in little circles to stay warm, said, "She could make a lot of money."

"I thought you said she was an angel."

"Angels can't make money?"

I just shook my head.

The stake-out driver came over. He looked sad. "The doc, he's my cousin." He spoke with his cousin's accent.

"I see," I said.

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"The girl," he said, "if she saves him, I'm going to let her go."

"That's the right thing to do."

"Do you understand any of this, the way she heals people?"

"Not a bit."

"I still say she's an angel," Vic said. "Or a Martian."

Just as he started to scowl at Vic, Jenny appeared in the passenger door. "You may come back now."

Five minutes later, we were feeding the doc some of the tepid vending machine coffee we'd had earlier.

I can't say he looked great — he was still very shaky and pale — but he was awake and talking.

He sat in one of the passenger seats, Jenny next to him.

"I wish you would let me learn about you," the doc said.

She sat there so pretty and sad and said, "I just accept it, Doctor. It's a gift and you don't question gifts."

I went over and said, "You look tired, Jenny, how about if I take you back?"

She stared up at me through her blindness and said, "Thank you. I really need to rest."

12

The three of us sat in the front seat. Vic had his arm around Jenny. I wanted my arm to be around Jenny. I wanted Vic to be on the other side of the world.

"We really owe you for this, man," Vic was saying. "I mean, you really came through for us."

"He's right," Jenny said gently, speaking above the hot blast of the car heater. "We really are very grateful."

"I'm gonna change, man. I really am. I'm taking this pledge right now. Vic McRea is a brand-new man. And I mean that, babe."

My God, I thought, is she really going to buy into this bilge?

When we reached their apartment house, I pulled over to the curb. I felt great sorrow and rage. I was losing her.

"Jenny, I — " I started to say.

But Vic already had the door open and was climbing out.

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Jenny quickly took my hand and leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "You're really a remarkable man, I hope you know that."

"C'mon, babe," Vic said from outside, "I'm freezing my tush."

And then they were gone.

13

I didn't sleep well. I had all the old bad dreams and then I had a new bad dream, that Jenny and Vic were on an airplane and flying away and I was standing on the tarmac feeling an icy emptiness and a kind of animal panic.

And then somebody was knocking at my door and I was looking at the sunlight in my bedroom window.

I got my robe on and answered the knock and there she was.

"I heard you were looking for a new partner," she said, "so I thought I'd apply for the job."

I kept my lips pressed tight so nothing of my morning mouth would escape and then I took her in my arms and held her right there in the doorway.

Inside, she said, "I told Vic goodbye this morning. He took it a lot better than I thought he would. Especially after I gave him my last $500."

"Good old Vic," I said.

"Yes, good ole Vic," she said. "Now how about some coffee?"

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GUILTY PLEASURES

MICHELLE WEST

Shade and Shadow, by Francine G. Woodbury, Del Rey, June 1996, 313pp, $5.99, Paperback

Daredevil: Predator's Smile, by Christopher Golden, Boulevard, April 1996, 384pp, $5.99, Paperback

Anvil of the Sun, by Anne Lesley Groell, Roc, September 1996, 432 pp, $5.99

Goa, Blood of the Goddess Vol 1, by Kara Dalkey, Tor, August 1996, 256pp, $21.95, Hardcover

MOVING, for anyone who has experienced it, is only fun the first time you leave your parents' house, with the possessions of a handful of years and a great deal of optimism — if it's even fun then. The first time I moved, my father put my bed, my desk and my shelves into the back of his GM van and drove across town; it took about fifteen minutes to unload because my university friends had not yet scattered themselves across the globe. We ordered pizza. We felt independent, excited, even a little bewitched.

A small child and a house later, the feelings are so remarkably different, I can almost believe that very little remains of that young woman. Disorientation, a vague sense of unease, a desperate, even obsessive urge to get everything unpacked and put in its proper place — this while the house is being repaired around me and my son is plaintively asking — pleading — to go *home* rather than stay in this dreadful Other Place, conspires in such a way that I can safely say that what energy I have is dissipated in the process of trying to make this a home. Oh, and a little in the process of feeling guilty about finding it all stressful when, essentially, I'm lucky enough to be able to move at all.

Which brings us to this month's column.

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I want to read at the end of the day. I don't want to be told that I'm a lousy reader at the end of the day — I just want to relax with a book and a moment of quiet peace before I collapse.

There is something I call the 2:00 A.M. test. I have to be able to open, read, and *follow* a book at two in the morning of a day that started at eight or nine. I had initially chosen about six novels to read for the column and set them aside. Through no fault whatever of the books themselves, four of the six failed the 2:00 A.M. test. They were difficult enough, in either structure or language or complexity, that I could not follow them without backtracking. As the only brain I have at the moment — no matter what the hour — is the 2:00 A.M. brain, they were put aside.

It is *not* easy to find a book that is both easy to read and engaging — I know. I think I read the first chapters of every book on the shelf. However, I did find a few, and though they passed the test, they passed for different reasons.

Shade and Shadow passed that test because of the sheer charm of the characters that newcomer Francine Woodbury has created. The book is set in an alternate Oxford, and her protagonist is a prickly, solitary, brilliant young man named Raoul Ahmahn Giamboni Smythe (the name is emphatically not his fault) — an academic magician with a bent for doing old things in new ways. This puts him at odds with the department chair, Arthur Mowatt, a man who believes that magic must have both mystery and ritual, which doesn't really surprise anybody until the aforementioned department chair turns up dead. There are no witnesses, of course, and no one who has any real motivation — which leaves Raoul, whose alibi is that he walked most of the way home to better muse about his current research. Alone.

The only people who are allowed into Raoul's life are people who are, by default, already there. His best friend, Maxwell Bolton, a man who is outgoing, friendly, and genuinely interested in people of any kind, was a fellow-inmate at an upscale boarding school. Actually, Raoul does have other friends, but the only really close one is Bolton — and that question, of closeness, of trust, of anger — is threaded throughout this book as Bolton and Raoul attempt to find a killer before the police decide he's the only possible suspect. It makes the book work on a personal level, and it really makes me want to see

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more of these characters.

This is a cross-genre novel; a fantasy and a mystery. I like the use of magic — it's very practical, very demystified, very much a science. But because it's so underplayed, the book reads much like a straight mystery, except that the mystery itself wouldn't exist without the presence of magic; this is probably one of the most successful blends of the two genres that I've ever read.

Predator's Smile, a novel about one of the lesser-known Marvel comics heroes, Daredevil, passed the 2:00 A.M. test for me because I was completely familiar with the world. Enough so that I found the explanations of who Daredevil and his various associates are somewhat tedious; this is not a short book, and I think that in the attempt to fill in readers who have never read the comic books, Christopher Golden loses a lot of momentum. I cannot assess the book as an outsider because I'm not one; the Frank Miller *Daredevil* runs are two of the strongest bits of writing I've yet come across, and they stay with me as a series of vivid, tense images.

An editor I know said that, in the real world, the laws of physics are absolute and the laws of morality are warped, but in the world of comics, it's the laws of physics that are warped and the laws of morality that are absolute. He's right, and in reading comics, there is some comfort; the heroes are defined by the choices they make, but they also have the power it takes to defend the world against pumped up, deadly bullies.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise that I liked this book, flaws and all. Melvin Potter is a reformed convict, a man who used to be known as the Gladiator, but who, with the help of Daredevil and psychologist Betsy Potter, the woman who eventually became his wife, turned away from a life of anger and violence to become, as he simply calls it, a good man. He is afraid of the ability to act violently — at all — because he doesn't trust himself to be a hero; there's the darkness of the past, and there's the simplicity of the present. The only crime he fights is internal. And then his wife, Betsy, is kidnapped — for no known reason — and that constructed world falls apart.

Threaded around this is the reappearance of the villain Bullseye, the crimelord Wilson Fisk, and the Daredevil himself, a man who has to help Melvin Potter — and then who unexpectedly has to help him-

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self — recover the center of his life. Simplistic? Yes. But not more so than many of the novels on the market today, and anyway, I found it touching, particularly the end.

Anvil of the Sun passed the 2:00 A.M. test because it was easy to read in almost every sense of the word. It is the type of book that is commonly called a lark or a romp, and if it weren't for the actual profession the various protagonists aspire to, there would be something almost Eddingsesque in their dialogue — a lightness and a wit and a flitting charm. But the profession is there, and they do aspire to it (or practice it): They are assassins, or would-be assassins, by trade.

Jenifleur and Thibault are best friends, reunited after a stretch of time that leaves him a lot larger (one of my favorite lines in the book is Jen's first greeting) and her a lot the same. Jen was sent to foster with her aunt shortly after her father's death, which happens to many young girls. But her aunt is the near-legendary Hawk, an assassin who is without parallel.

The Guild in Groell's world is a Guild that bases its decision to kill on its own code of ethics; it won't accept a kill that it doesn't believe in some way justified. I believe it does keep the money, however — a way of discouraging people from hiring assassins without just cause. This works for me as a reader, because I find it hard to deal with people who want to kill other people for a living. But it remains that the Hawk and Jen are killers, and it shows in their character.

The Hawk, for the first time, is in rather more trouble than she can easily handle, and in the end, Jen decides that it's up to her to fly — figuratively, of course — to the rescue, dragging the steady and doting Thibault in her wake.

The biggest problem that I had with this book was the Hawk herself. I thought that the situation that unfolded around her was a very neat trap — but as she's supposed to be the best and the brightest, I also thought that she fell for it far too completely. It's one of the problems that a writer hits when dealing with the near-legendary; it engenders a certain expectation in readers. The Hawk, however, proves at least as resourceful as one would expect once entrapped, and I'd still like to know what happens to Jen and Thibault in the future.

The last book, *Goa* by Kara Dalkey, passed the 2:00 A.M. test because it was strong enough to

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wake me up. Once I was awake, it was clear enough to follow, even though the spoken language — the dialogue which is so important — isn't contemporary. Which is as it should be, given that this is a historical fantasy set in the city of the title at the turn of the century. The fifteenth century.

Thomas Chinnery is an apothecary's apprentice — a man who collects and uses herbs in a very historical way, which brings about a certain poignancy, because a modern reader knows enough to know how useless so much of his hard-won skill is when they see him desperately attempt to apply it. On an English ship bound for Cathay in the hopes of opening trade routes, he is thrown into a few convenient bounty hunts, and the last ship boarded, a Portuguese galleon, holds a bounty that he could not have conceived of: a red powder that can wake the dead.

The owner of the powder is an alchemist, and his traveling companion is a mysterious, exotic woman named Aditi — a servant of the Goddess, an almost-daughter. Pushed toward them by Lockheart, one of his traveling companions, Thomas the apothecary takes his first steps on a road that could lead a healing man to the greatest discovery of his life. And could lead a Christian straight to hell.

I have a strong sense of place when I read Dalkey — although I confess that I don't know the historical Goa at all. Everyone's actions and motivations fall into place and make sense. I definitely want the other two volumes. Liking a character — believing in a character — is very important to me as a reader, and I really liked Thomas Chinnery. He's resourceful enough in his young way that he manages to survive for long enough to wind up in the Santa Casa, the haven of the Goan Inquisition, men dedicated to preserving souls at the cost of the mere flesh.

Here, too, Dalkey is deft; the Inquisition is such an easy target, such an obvious "villain" that it would be just as easy to fall into stereotype when portraying it. She doesn't, and in particular, through the viewpoint of a young advocate, shows that the belief of the importance of saving the soul itself can be heartbreakingly genuine and pure.

But it's hard to judge the complete success of this book because at the end, someone makes a revelation to young Thomas that I can't — or don't — believe, and if it's true, then it's a flaw in the novel — but if it's part of that character's as yet

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incomprehensible plan, then it's extremely well done. I've rarely had this happen to me as a reader; usually it's obvious one way or the other.

Either way, I'm definitely glad I read the book — it's an ambitious undertaking and Dalkey should be proud of it.

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Brief Reviews: Books

Clouds End, by Sean Stewart, Ace, August 1996, 384pp, $19.95, Hardcover

FANS OF Ursula K. Le Guin's Earth-Sea books will likely appreciate Sean Stewart's *Clouds End*; the book manages to catch the mood and flavor of Le Guin's trilogy rather nicely.

Those with less patience for that sort of fantasy may find themselves less enchanted, alas. The book has some peculiar quirks that don't serve it near so well in practice as they must've as Stewart conceived them. Stewart has, for instance, pushed the envelope of traditional dramatic structure inside out, and the new form isn't really functional: The book's dramatic climax rests squarely in the center of the text, leaving the reader with a good half-novelful of aclimactic dénouement.

All the same, Sean Stewart is a writer to watch. *Clouds End* shows a powerful talent and a fine craftsmanship; its flaws are ambitious ones. And for all that they're a bother, Stewart's prose, his setting, and his storytelling somehow manage to carry the reader through to the novel's final scene.

No small accomplishment. But that's the kind of talent Stewart has; his gifts will likely carry him a very long way indeed.

Humpty Dumpty, An Oval, by Damon Knight, Tor, September 1996, 288pp, $22.95, Hardcover

True to its title, *Humpty Dumpty* starts with a head injury, and the rest of the tale traces the victim's attempts to reassemble the pieces of his life into some kind of meaningful whole. But Wellington Stout's task is even more difficult than that of the king's horses and men, for his injury has apparently disrupted not only his memory but the very nature of reality. Either that or he is hallucinating worse than Timothy Leary on a good day, but if he's not then the fate of the world hinges on his actions.

The reader, like Stout, will probably not be able to make sense of all that happens. As the subtitle, "An Oval," suggests, this is not a

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conventional novel. It is a journey of discovery, a journey without road signs, map, or compass, and it terminates in a foreign land, but with plenty of interesting scenery along the way.

The Farseer: Assassin's Apprentice, by Robin Hobb, Bantam Spectra, May 1995, 368pp, $12.95 Trade Paper (mass market available)

Robin Hobb's *The Farseer: Assassin's Apprentice* hooks the reader from the first chapter. The fresh tale of FitzChivalry Farseer — the illegitimate son of the heir to the throne — begins when he is a young boy deposited without ceremony at the castle steps.

By the king's public and private decrees, Fitz is taught not only swordsmanship and courtly manners, but also the secret arts of the magical skill and the even more hidden art of assassins. Fitz will need these talents and more to survive a kingdom attacked from within and without.

Told in skillful prose, with exquisite characterization and pacing that doesn't let up, *Assassin's Apprentice* is a keeper.

The Farseer: Royal Assassin by Robin Hobb, Bantam Spectra, May 1996, 592pp, $13.95, Trade Paper

Even more compelling and full of fascinating plot twists than the previous volume in the series, *Royal Assassin* opens as FitzChivalry Farseer is slowly healing from an assassination attempt on his own life. He returns to Buckkeep where court intrigue has not abated in his absence.

Fitz uses his assassin's training along with his unruly magical powers as he attempts to maneuver in a world where he has more enemies than friends. And yet some few recognize he may be the only one capable of saving the kingdom from the horrifying and mysterious Red Ship Raiders. The reader eagerly awaits the next book in this skillfully told series that sparkles with a magic all its own.

Cage of Night, by Ed Gorman, White Wolf, August 1996, 248pp, $5.99, Mass market

This dark thriller/mystery follows a man named Spence as he comes home to a small town after a three-year hitch in the army to find that some things have changed — his little brother, who used to be a nerd, is now a popular kid in high school, for instance, and his best friend Garrett, a former Conan-reading fellow nerd, is now a cop — and some things have stayed the same.

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As he edges back into civilian life, Spence becomes fascinated by Homecoming Queen and former mental patient Cindy Brasher.

And in the meantime, people are dying in awful ways.

Spence is an engaging protagonist; Gorman is a skillful writer; the climax of the book turns the reader's expectations upside down, which is refreshing and disquieting.

Magazine Beach, by Lewis Gannett, HarperPrism, $23

In a world with five million square miles of Antarctic ice shelf, global warming threatens us with destructive floods. In this century, the sea level has risen two inches. If the shelf were to slide into the oceans, the level would quickly rise 170 feet. (Good-bye Boston, New York, and all of Florida.) Frightened hordes head for the hills. What then?

In Gannett's *Magazine Beach*, Earnest Trefethen, an internationally respected environmentalist (is he brilliant? is he mad?) threatens to blow loose the ice shelf with well-placed nuclear devices in order to bring a self-destructive world to its senses. Toby Swett, a "doomsday nut," discovers the key to the nuke-triggering process. What can he do?

Trefethen goes on television to spread his warning message and to display the detonation of one of his devices, after which he and his family head for a high-security compound. Panic in megalopolis. Enter the vicious terrorist Slatsky who wants the "key." Enter FATBOY (Federal Anti-Terror Bureau), the Army, the President, the Media ("Television loves vivid"), and Trefethen's daughter Grace, with whom Toby falls in love. Enter a multitude of characters who provide richness and variety to the story.

Lewis Gannett's catastrophe message hits home. *Magazine Beach* is well-researched and well-written, with a touch of cosmic irony. It's a good read for the beach. Watch the water rise.

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Jerry Oltion made his name as a hard sf writer. His science fiction stories have been nominated for the Nebula award, and he won the Analog *Reader's Choice award for his story "The Love Song of Laura Morrison." But Jerry also writes excellent fantasy stories, many of which have appeared in* F&SF. *(The most recent was "There Goes the Neighborhood" in our August issue.)*

Jerry's ability to write both fantasy and hard science fiction made this story almost inevitable. This novella is a hard science fantasy *— something that's rarely done because it's difficult to do well. Yet Jerry manages the combination excellently, as you will see when you read "Abandon in Place."*

Abandon in Place

By Jerry Oltion

SIX HOURS AFTER DEKE Slayton, the astronaut, died of cancer, his racing airplane took off from a California airport and never came down. The pilot didn't respond to the control tower, and the plane vanished from radar shortly after takeoff, but witnesses clearly identified it as Slayton's. Which was impossible, because that same airplane was in a museum in Nevada at the time.

The story made the rounds at the Cape. Engineers and administrators and astronauts all passed it along like scouts telling ghost stories around a campfire, but nobody took it seriously. It was too easy to mistake one plane for another, and everyone knew how fast rumors could get started. They had heard plenty of them over the years, from the guy who'd claimed to be run off the road by Grissom's Corvette after the *Apollo 1* fire to the Australian who'd supposedly found a piece of Yuri Gagarin's spacesuit in the debris that rained over the outback when *Skylab* came down. This was just one more strange bit of folklore tacked onto the Apollo era, which was itself fast fading into legend.

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Then Neil Armstrong died, and a Saturn V launched itself from pad 34.

Rick Spencer was there the morning it went up. He had flown his T-38 down from Arlington right after the funeral, grabbed a few hours of sleep right there at the Cape, then driven over to the shuttle complex before dawn to watch the ground crew load a communications satellite into the *Atlantis*. The ungainly marriage of airplane and rocket on pad 39A would be his ticket to orbit in another week if they ever got the damned thing off the ground, but one of the technicians forgot to mark a step off his checklist and the whole procedure shut down while the foreman tried to decide whether to back up and verify the job or take the tech at his word when he said he'd done it. Rick was getting tired of waiting for somebody to make a decision, so he went outside the sealed payload mating bay for a breath of fresh air.

The sun had just peeked over the horizon. The wire catwalk beneath his feet and the network of steel girders all around him glowed reddish gold in the dawn light. The hammerhead crane overhead seemed like a dragon's long, slender neck and head leaning out to sniff curiously at the enormous winged orbiter that stood there sweating with dew beneath its gaze. The ground, nearly two hundred feet below, was still inky black. Sunlight hadn't reached it yet, wouldn't for a few more minutes. The ocean was dark, too, except near the horizon where the brilliant crescent of sun reflected off the water.

From his high catwalk Rick looked down the long line of launch pads to the south, the tops of their gantries projecting up into the light as well. Except for pads 34 and 37. Those two had been decommissioned after the Apollo program, and now all that remained were the concrete bunkers and blast deflectors that couldn't be removed, low gray shapes still languishing in the shadow of early dawn. Just like the whole damned space program, Rick thought. Neil had been given a hero's burial, and the President's speech had been full of promise for renewed support of manned exploration in space, but it was all a lot of hot air and everyone knew it. The aging shuttle fleet was all America had, and all it was likely to get for the foreseeable future. Even if NASA could shake off the bureaucratic stupor it had fallen into and propose a new program, Congress would never pass an appropriations bill for the hardware.

Rick looked away, but a flicker of motion drew his attention back to

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pad 34, where brilliant floodlights now lit a gleaming white rocket and its orange support tower. Rick blinked, but it didn't go away. He stepped closer to the railing and squinted. Where had *that* come from? Over half of it rose above the dawn line; Rick looked over the edge of the *Atlantis*'s gantry and made a quick guess based on his own height. That rocket had to be over three hundred feet tall.

Three hundred and sixty-three, to be exact. Rick couldn't measure it that closely, but he didn't need to. He recognized the black-striped Saturn V instantly, and he knew its stats by heart. He had memorized them when he was a kid, sitting in front of his parents' black-and-white TV set while he waited for the liftoffs. Three hundred sixty-three feet high, weighing over three thousand tons when fueled, the five F-1 engines in its first stage producing seven and a half *million* pounds of thrust — it was the biggest rocket ever built.

And it had also been over thirty years since the last of them flew. Rick closed his eyes and rubbed them with his left hand. Evidently Neil's death had affected him more than he thought. But when he looked to the south again he still saw the brilliant white spike standing there in its spotlight glare, mist swirling down its side as the liquid oxygen in its tanks chilled the air around the massive rocket.

Rick was alone on the gantry. Everyone else was inside, arguing about the payload insertion procedure. He considered going in and asking someone to come out and tell him if he was crazy or not, but he abandoned that thought immediately. One week before his first flight, he wasn't about to confess to hallucinations.

It sure looked real. Rick watched the dawn line creep down the Saturn's flank, sliding over the ever-widening stages until it reached the long cylinder of the main body. The spectacle was absolutely silent. The only sound came from closer by: the squeak and groan of the shuttle gantry expanding as it began to warm under the light.

Then, without warning, a billowing cloud of reddish white smoke erupted from the base of the rocket. The eye-searing brightness of RP-1 and oxygen flame lit up the cloud from within, and more exhaust blasted sideways out of the flame deflectors.

Rick felt the gantry vibrate beneath him, but there was still no sound. The exhaust plume rose nearly as high as the nose cone, roiling like a

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mushroom cloud over an atomic blast, then slowly the rocket began to lift. Bright white flame sprayed the entire launch pad as the thundering booster, gulping thousands of gallons of fuel per second, rose into the sky. Only when the five bell-shaped nozzles cleared the gantry — nearly ten seconds after liftoff — did the solid beam of flame grow ragged at the edges. A few final tongues of it licked the ground, then the rocket lifted completely into the air.

The shuttle gantry beneath Rick's feet shook harder. He grabbed for support just as the sound reached him: a thunderous, crackling assault that sent him staggering back against the catwalk's inner railing, his hands over his ears. The gantry shook like a skyscraper in an earthquake, knocking him to his knees on the non-skid grating. He didn't try to rise again, just stared upward in awe as the Saturn V dwindled rapidly now and the roar of its engines tapered off with distance.

The glare left afterimages when he blinked. He didn't care. He watched the rocket arc over and begin its long downrange run, picking up orbital velocity now that it had cleared the thickest part of the atmosphere.

The door behind him burst open and a flood of white-jacketed technicians scrambled out. The first few stopped when they saw the enormous plume of exhaust rising into the sky, and the ones behind them piled into their backs, forcing them forward until everyone was packed near the railing. Molly, the payload foreman, gave Rick a hand up, and bent close to his ear to shout over the roar of the rocket and the babble of voices, "What the hell was that?"

Rick shook his head. "Damned if I know."

"There wasn't supposed to be a launch today," she said.

Rick looked up at the dwindling rocket, now just a bright spark aiming for the sun, and said, "Something tells me Control was just as surprised as we were." He pointed toward the base of the exhaust plume, where the cloud had spread out enough to reveal the gantry again.

"What?" Molly asked, squinting to see through the billowing steam. Then she realized what he was pointing at. "Isn't that pad thirty-four?"

Molly and her payload crew reluctantly trooped back into the mating bay to see if the shaking had damaged their satellite, but since Rick was

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on his own time he rode the cage elevator down to the ground, climbed into his pickup, and joined the line of cars streaming toward the launch site.

The scrub oak and palmetto that lined the service road prevented anyone from seeing the pad until they had nearly reached it. Rick thought he should have been able to see the 400-foot gantry, at least, but when he arrived at the pad he realized why he hadn't. It had vanished just as mysteriously as it had arrived, leaving not a trace.

Rick drove across the vast concrete apron to the base of the old launch pedestal. It looked like an enormous concrete footstool: four squat legs holding a ten-foot-thick platform forty feet in the air, with a thirty-foot-wide hole in the platform for the rocket exhaust to pour through. Off to the side stood the foundation and the thick blast protection wall of the building that had once housed propellant pumps and service equipment. Now both structures looked old and weathered. Rust streaks ran down their gray sides, and stenciled on the pitted concrete, the paint itself fading now, were the words, "ABANDON IN PLACE."

Weeds grew out of cracks in the apron, still green and vigorous even right up next to the pedestal. Rick was beginning to doubt what he'd seen, because obviously nothing had launched from this pad for at least a decade.

But the contrail still arched overhead, high-altitude winds snaking it left and right, and when Rick opened the door and stepped out of his pickup he smelled the unmistakable mixture of RP-1 smoke and steam and scorched cement that came with a launch.

Doors slammed as more people got out of their cars. Dozens of them were there already, and more arrived every minute, but what should have been an unruly mob was strangely quiet. Nobody wanted to admit what they'd seen, especially in the face of so much conflicting evidence.

Rick recognized Tessa McClain, an experienced astronaut whom he'd dated a few times in the last couple of months, climbing out of the back of a white van along with half a dozen other people from the vehicle assembly building. When she saw him she jogged across the concrete to his side and said, "Did you see it?" Her face glowed with excitement.

"Yeah," Rick said. "I was up on the gantry at thirty-nine."

She looked up at the contrail overhead, her straight blond hair falling

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back over her shoulders. "Wow. That must have been a hell of a sight. I felt it shake the ground, but I didn't get outside until it was already quite a ways up." She looked back down at him. "It was a Saturn Five, wasn't it?"

"That's what it looked like," he admitted.

"God, this is incredible." She turned once around, taking in the entire launch pad. "A moon rocket! I never expected to see anything like it ever again."

"Me either," Rick said. He struggled to find the words to express what he was thinking. "But how could we possibly have seen anything? There's no tower here, no fuel tanks, nothing. And the launch pedestal is too small for a fully fueled Saturn V. This complex was for the S-1B's."

She grinned like a child at Christmas. "I'm sure whoever — or whatever — staged this little demonstration was able to make all the support hardware they needed. And take it away again when they were done with it."

Rick shook his head. "But that's impossible."

Tessa laughed. "We all saw it." She pointed upward. "And the contrail's still there." Suddenly her eyes grew even wider.

"What?" Rick asked.

She looked across the rolling hummocks of palmetto toward the fifty-story-high vehicle assembly building — and the launch control center at its base. "I wonder if it's sending back telemetry?"

IT TOOK A WHILE to find out. Nobody remembered what frequencies the Apollo spacecraft broadcast on or what protocols the data streams used, and the ground controllers had to dig through archived manuals to find out. It took still more time to set up the receivers to accept the signals, but when the technicians eventually tuned into the right frequencies they found a steady information flow. They couldn't decode most of it, since the software to do that had been written for the old RCA computer system, but they did at least establish that the rocket had not vanished along with its ground support structures.

Rick and Tessa were in the launch control center now, watching the overhead monitors while programmers in the central instrumentation building frantically attempted to adapt the old programs to the new

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machines. What they saw was mostly a lot of numbers, but every few minutes one of the programmers would patch in another section of translated code and another display would wink into place on the screen. They had already figured out cabin temperature and pressure, fuel level in the upper stage tanks, and a few of the other simple systems.

By this point in a normal flight the whole project would rightfully belong to Mission Control in Houston, but there was nothing normal about this launch. When the Houston flight director heard what the Kennedy team was doing, he wanted nothing to do with it anyway. He intended to keep his own neck well out of the way when heads started rolling after this crazy debacle was over.

But the spacecraft stubbornly refused to disappear. Radar tracked it through one complete orbit and part of another, when its altitude and velocity began to rise. At the same time, the fuel levels in the third stage tanks began to drop. That could mean only one thing: The booster was firing again.

"Translunar injection," Tessa whispered. "They're going for the Moon."

"Who's 'they'?" Rick asked. So far none of the telemetry indicated a live — or even a ghostly — passenger in the command module.

"It's got to be Neil," Tessa said. "And who knows who else is going with him."

"Neil is in a box in Arlington cemetery," Rick said. "I saw them put him there."

"And you saw the launch this morning," Tessa reminded him. "Neil being on board it is no more impossible than the rocket itself."

"Good point." Rick shrugged. Every dead astronaut from Gagarin on could be in the mystery Apollo capsule for all he knew. This bizarre manifestation was completely new territory; nobody knew the rules yet.

Enough people claimed to, of course. Psychics seemed to crawl out of the woodwork over the next few days, each with their own interpretation of the event. NASA had to close the gates and post guards around the perimeter of the space center to keep it from being overrun by curious mystics, but that merely fueled speculation that they were developing a new super-secret space vehicle at the taxpayers' expense.

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The administration tried the silent approach at first, but when that charge was leveled they reluctantly admitted that for once the fruitcakes were closer to the truth than the whistleblowers. In a carefully worded press release, NASA's public relations spokesman said, "What appeared to be a Saturn Five moon rocket seemed to launch from the deserted complex thirty-four. This alleged launch was not authorized by NASA, nor was it part of any program of which NASA is aware. A complete investigation of the incident is being made, and our findings will be made public as soon as we learn what actually occurred."

That was Bureauspeak for, "We don't have a clue either." Rick spent days with the investigation team, going over his story again and again — careful to say "appeared to" and "looked like" at all the appropriate spots — until he could recite it in his sleep, but no one was the wiser afterward. They examined the launch pad, which revealed no sign of a liftoff. All they could do was listen to the telemetry coming from the spacecraft and speculate.

Three days after its launch, the ghost Apollo entered lunar orbit. A few hours after that, the lunar module separated from the command module and made a powered descent toward the surface. It wasn't headed for the Sea of Tranquility. It appeared to be landing at Copernicus, one of the sites proposed for further Apollo missions before the last three had been cancelled. But when it reached 500 feet, the telemetry suddenly stopped.

"What the hell happened?" demanded Dale Jackson, the impromptu flight director for the mission. He stood beside one of the consoles on the lowest of the terraced rows, looking around at the dozens of technicians who were scrambling to reacquire the signal.

Tessa and Rick were watching from farther up, sitting side by side at unused consoles and holding hands like teenagers on a date at the best movie of all time. When the telemetry stopped, Tessa flinched as if a monster had just jumped out of a closet.

"What happened?" Rick asked. "Did it blow up?"

Tessa shook her head. "Everything stopped," she said. "The command module too, and it was still in orbit."

"Five hundred feet," Rick said. Something about that figure nagged at him. What happened at five hundred feet in a normal lunar descent? "Got

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it!" he said, loudly enough that everyone in the room looked back up at the screens. When they saw no data there, they turned to him.

"Five hundred feet was 'low gate,' when the pilot was supposed to take over from the descent computer and actually land the LEM," he told them. "The computer couldn't take it all the way to the surface. It wasn't sophisticated enough to choose a landing site."

Jackson asked, "So, what, you think it crashed? It was still five hundred feet up."

Rick hesitated. He'd been biting his tongue for days now, afraid of knocking himself off the *Atlantis* mission with a poorly chosen phrase, but he had grown tired of being timid. He cleared his throat and said, "I think when the time came for a human to take over, it went back to wherever it came from."

"Sure it did." Jackson turned to the technicians. "Get me that signal."

They tried, but it quickly became apparent that there simply wasn't a signal any longer. Not even radar could find any sign of the spacecraft. The mysterious Apollo had vanished without a trace.

NASA held back Rick's *Atlantis* mission an extra week while the ground crew checked the ship for damage from the shaking it had received, but at last they pronounced it ready to fly. On the morning of the launch, Rick and four other astronauts rode the elevator up the gantry, climbed in through the hatch in the side of the orbiter, and strapped themselves into their acceleration chairs. After a countdown that was only interrupted twice due to a defective pressure sensor in a fuel line, they finally lit the three main engines and the two solid rocket boosters and rode America's space truck into orbit.

It was Rick's first time in space. He had expected to be excited, and he was, but somehow not so excited as he had imagined. Instead of watching the Earth slide past beneath him, he spent most of his free time watching the Moon, now just past full. It had been lunar dawn at the landing site when the Apollo had lifted off, just the way it had been for the real flights over a quarter of a century earlier. That was to give the crew the best lighting angle for landing, and to make sure they had plenty of daylight to explore in. And to make emergency repairs if anything went wrong.

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What a wild time that must have been, he thought as he floated between the pilot's and copilot's chairs and looked out the forward windows at the white disk a quarter million miles away. Flying by the seat of your pants, your life right at your fingertips and the entire world watching over your shoulder to see if you had the wits to keep yourself alive. Aldrin had accidentally snapped off the pin of the ascent engine arming switch with his backpack, and he'd had to poke a felt pen into the hole to arm the engines before he and Armstrong could leave the Moon. A felt pen! If something like that happened on the shuttle, ground control would probably order the crew to conserve power and wait for a rescue — except they still couldn't launch a second shuttle within a month of the first one. Maybe they could get the Russians to come up and push the button for them with one of *their* felt pens.

He was being unfair. The Hubble telescope repair had taken some real ingenuity, and the spacelab scientists were always fixing broken equipment. But none of that had the same dazzle as flying to the Moon. Nowadays the shuttle astronauts seemed more like appliance repairmen than intrepid explorers. Rick had convinced himself that the shuttle was doing some valuable science, but now, after seeing a Saturn V launch only two weeks earlier, he realized that science wasn't what had thrilled him when he'd watched them as a kid, and it wasn't why he was here now. He was in space because he wanted to explore it, and this — barely two hundred miles off the ground — was the farthest into it he could get.

He wished Tessa were on his flight. She would know what he was feeling. On their dates, they had talked a lot about their reasons for becoming astronauts, and she had admitted to the same motives as he. But she had been scheduled for *Discovery*'s next launch in a month and a half.

He heard a shout from the mid-deck. "Merde!" A moment later, Pierre Renaud, the Canadian payload specialist whose company had paid for his ticket, floated through the hatchway onto the flight deck.

"What's the matter?" Rick asked when he saw the look of dismay on Pierre's face.

"The toilet has broken," Pierre said.

Rick was on post-flight vacation in Key West when the next one went up. The phone woke him from a sound sleep just after dawn, and when he

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fumbled the receiver to his ear and answered it, Dale Jackson's gravelly voice said, "There's been another Saturn launch. Get your ass up here so we can compare notes with the last time."

Rick came instantly awake. Less than an hour later he was in the air headed north. By the time he crossed Lake Okeechobee he could see the ragged remains of the contrail, and when he arrived at the Cape the place looked like an anthill that had just been kicked. Cars zoomed up and down the service roads, and the public highways outside the gates were packed in all directions.

Two wide-eyed Air Force cadets escorted him from the airport to a meeting room in the headquarters building, where NASA's administrator, flight director, range safety officer, and at least a dozen other high-ranking officials were already deep in discussion over the incident. Rick noted with amusement that the flight surgeon was also present, and presumably taking notes. Jackson, the flight director, was talking about the difficulty of decommissioning a fully fueled Saturn V on the pad, should another one appear.

"We don't even have facilities there to store the fuel anymore, much less pump it," he was saying. "Especially not in the fifteen minutes or so that these things stick around. That's barely time enough to hook up the couplings."

Tessa was there as well, and she smiled wide and waved when she saw Rick. He edged around the conference table and pulled up a chair beside her. "What are you doing here?" he whispered.

"Getting the third degree," Tessa answered. "I was at the pad when this one lifted off."

"Which pad?"

"Thirty-four."

"You're kidding. You'd be toast if you were that close to the launch."

"I was in the blockhouse."

Rick supposed that would offer some protection. And besides, even that might not be necessary. The weeds hadn't been charred or blown away in the first launch. "Why were you there?" he asked. "How did you know it would happen again?"

She grinned, obviously proud of herself. "Because ghosts usually

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repeat themselves until they get whatever they came for, and today was the next launch window."

At the head of the table, Jackson was still talking. "...Nor do we have crawler capability to remove the rocket even if we *could* pump it dry. We'd have to completely rebuild the access road, and in the meantime we'd be left with a thirty-six-story embarrassment."

Rick sized up the meeting in an instant. NASA saw these ghost rockets as a threat, and wanted them stopped.

"Why don't we just put astronauts in them instead?" he asked. "There's time enough to ride up the gantry and climb inside before launch."

Jackson squinted down the table at him. "In a completely unknown and untested vehicle? No way."

"It's not unknown or untested," said Tessa. "It's a Saturn Five."

"It's a goddamned mystery," Jackson said, "and there's no valid reason to risk anyone's life on one, either on the ground or in space."

"What do you propose to do, then?" the range safety officer asked. "Shoot them down?"

Nervous laughter broke out around the table, but quickly died out. Jackson shook his head. "I propose we let them go. Assuming there are any more. They aren't harming anything except our image."

Warren Altman, latest in a string of five new administrators in the last two years, said, "Yes, precisely. Our image. We're in enough trouble as it is without Congress thinking things are out of control down here." He paused to take off his glasses, and used one of the earpieces for a pointer as he continued, "No, Dale, we can't afford to do nothing. No matter how bizarre this situation is, we've got to take control of it, show Congress that we're handling it, or we'll lose even more credibility than we already have. That means decommissioning the damned things, and if we can't do it on the ground then we'll just have to do it in orbit."

"How?" asked Jackson.

"Just as Rick suggested. Put an astronaut in one, and let him interrupt the mission once it reaches Earth orbit. We'll already have a shuttle up there next month; it can rendezvous with the Apollo and our astronaut can return on the shuttle."

"Leaving the third stage and the rest of the spacecraft in orbit," Jackson pointed out.

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"Better there than on the pad," Altman replied. "Besides, maybe we can figure out a use for it. *Skylab* was just an empty Saturn third stage." He laughed. "Hell, if this continues for a few months, we could have all the habitat modules we need to build a real space station."

"And what if they disappear on us just like the last one?"

Altman's eyes narrowed. He hadn't thought of that. But he just shrugged and said, "We'll worry about that later. Chances are the damned things will fade out as soon as we interfere anyway. That's what usually happens with ghosts." He pointed his glasses at Rick. "It's your idea; do you want to volunteer?"

"Of course I do!" Rick said.

"You lucky bastard," Tessa whispered.

HE THOUGHT SO TOO, until the training started. For the next month, Jackson kept him on sixteen-hour days in the simulators, training for a mission that hadn't even been considered in over two decades. He learned every switch and dial in the Apollo command module until he could operate the ship with his eyes closed, and he practiced every contingency that the flight engineers could come up with, including a lunar flyby and slingshot back to Earth in case the rocket wouldn't let him shut it down before translunar injection. They had plenty of data already for that kind of abort: *Apollo 13* had done a slingshot return when an oxygen tank had blown on the way to the Moon.

Rick even argued them into letting him train in a mockup lunar module, reasoning that he might be able to use it as a lifeboat in case of a similar emergency. They also let him practice using the descent and ascent engines for emergency thrust, and after he wheedled with them for a few days they even let him practice landing.

"Only because it'll help you get a feel for the controls," Jackson told him. "You couldn't actually land even if you wanted to, because if you separate the lunar module from the command module, you're dead. Rendezvous and docking is done from the command module, and you won't have a pilot."

Rick wondered about that. They didn't know who or what might inhabit the capsule atop the enormous rocket. It might be anything from

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Armstrong's preserved corpse to the Ghost of Christmas Future. The only thing NASA knew for sure was that they weren't going to risk more than one person on this flight.

So Rick found himself standing alone at the base of the concrete pedestal during the hour before dawn on the morning of the next launch window. He wore a shuttle spacesuit modified to allow him to lie in an Apollo couch — the best they could come up with in only a month, since the few remaining Apollo suits in the Smithsonian and other museums were over thirty years old and wouldn't hold air without major refurbishing. He also wore a parachute strapped to his back. The parachute was Jackson's idea, in case the whole Saturn V, gantry and all, faded away when Rick tried to enter the capsule 350 feet off the ground.

Pad 34 was spooky in the pre-dawn twilight. Little gusts of wind rattled the bushes that grew out of the cracks in the concrete, and Rick felt eyes watching him. Most of those belonged to the NASA personnel who waited in the blockhouse nearly a thousand feet away, but the tingling at the back of his neck made Rick wonder if other eyes were watching him as well, and maybe judging him. What would they make of him? He'd been barely ten years old when the *Eagle* landed, was never a military pilot like the first astronauts, never even a soldier. Just a kid who'd always dreamed of becoming an astronaut. And now here he stood with his spacesuit on, holding his suitcase-sized portable ventilator like a banker with his briefcase waiting at a subway stop, while the empty launch pad mocked his every breath.

Even the pads to the north were empty. *Discovery* had already lifted off three days ago, taking Tessa and five others into orbit with the Spacelab, where they were to study the effects of free fall on fruit fly mating habits — and also to await Rick's arrival. They had put themselves in the most likely orbit for the Apollo to take, but it was still a gamble and everyone knew it. If they had guessed wrong, Rick would have to go to plan B: re-entry using the Apollo capsule.

There would be no rescue if that didn't work. None of the other shuttles were even close to being ready for launch; *Atlantis* was still at Edwards, waiting for a ride home that might never come because the 747 carrier plane had developed cracks in the wing struts, and *Columbia* and *Endeavor* were both in the vehicle assembly building with their suppos-

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edly reusable engines scattered across acres of service bay while the technicians tried to match enough parts to get one complete set to work.

At least Rick was there. His heart was pounding, but he was there and ready to fly. He squared his shoulders and checked his watch. Any time now.

Suddenly, silently, the rocket appeared. Spotlight glare blinded Rick until he lowered his sun visor, then he turned once around to orient himself. The gantry was right where he'd expected it to be, and the Saturn V...Rick tilted his head back and felt his heart skip a beat. It was colossal. From right there at the base of it, the thing looked like it already reached to the Moon.

He didn't have time to gawk. He ran awkwardly for the elevator, his boots slapping the concrete, then climbed inside the elevator cage and rode it all the way to the top, nervously watching the ground drop farther and farther away. Two-thirds of the way up, he crossed into sunlight.

The metal structure squeaked and groaned around him, just like the shuttle gantry did. The grating underfoot scuffed against his boots as he crossed over on the swing arm bridge to the white room and the capsule. The hatch was open, as if waiting for him. Normally a crew of technicians would be there to help him into his seat, but he was completely alone. Nobody waited inside the capsule, either. Quickly, lest the rocket launch with him on the gantry, he climbed in, unplugged his ventilator and tossed it back out the hatch, and plugged one of the ship's three umbilicals into his suit. He jounced up and down on the seat a time or two. Banged on the hatch frame with his gloved hand. Solid. Satisfied, he tossed the parachute out after the ventilator, pulled the hatch closed, sealed it, and sank back into the center couch.

The instrument panel was a forest of switches and knobs before him, uncomfortably close to his face. He scanned the readouts, looking for anomalies, while he took a deep breath and smelled the cool, metallic scent of pressurized air. His suit umbilical was working, then. He should have a radio link now, too. He spoke into his suit's microphone. "Control, this is Apollo, do you read?"

"Loud and clear," Jackson's voice said.

"Ready for liftoff," Rick told him.

"Good. Estimated time to launch...uh, call it two minutes."

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"Roger." Rick's pulse rate was sky high. He tried to calm himself down, but the lack of a real countdown somehow underscored how crazy this whole thing was. He was sitting on top of a ghost!

He forced himself to concentrate on the instruments in front of him. Main power bus, green. Cabin temperature, nominal. Fuel pressure —

Amber lights blinked on, and a low rumble vibrated the walls.

"Ignition sequence starting," Jackson said.

"Roger. I feel it."

"All engines running."

Through the hatch window Rick saw the swing arm glide away, and the cabin seemed to sway slightly to the right.

"Liftoff. We have liftoff."

The rumble grew louder, and now Rick felt the acceleration begin to build. The launch tower slid downward out of sight, and then all he could see was blue morning sky. He had expected the G's to slam him back into the seat, but they built gently as the booster burned its fuel and the rocket grew lighter. When the second stage ignited there was a lurch and the G's grew stronger, but still bearable.

This time Houston had gotten in on the act. Mission Control took over the flight now, and Laura Turner, the capsule communicator, said, "You're looking good, Apollo. Escape tower jettison in twenty seconds."

Rick felt the thump right on schedule, and now that the tower and its boost protection cover were gone he could see out the side windows as well. Florida was a long ways down already, and receding fast.

The third stage ignited a few minutes later, propelling the spaceship on into orbit. "Right on target," Laura said. "We track you one hundred miles uprange of *Discovery* and closing."

"Roger."

And now it was time for Rick to earn his ride. He didn't have to do much; NASA wouldn't let him fly the Apollo toward the shuttle. It was his job to disarm the engines and let Tessa bring the shuttle to him. Holding his breath, he reached out to the too-close instrument panel with his gloved index finger. Would the ship let him take over now, or would it hold him prisoner all the way to the Moon? Or would it vanish in a puff of smoke the moment he touched the controls?

Only one way to tell. The switches clicked home with a satisfying

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thunk, and the indicator lights showed those circuits dead. The rest of the instruments, and the capsule itself, remained undisturbed. Rick took a breath, then reported, "Engines disarmed. Apollo is now safe for rendezvous."

"Roger, Apollo. Sit back and enjoy the ride, Rick."

He unstrapped himself and drifted free of the acceleration couch. The Apollo capsule might be cramped compared to the shuttle, but with only one person in it he had enough room to float from window to window and look at the blue and white Earth below.

And at the Moon, once again in its crescent phase. It beckoned to him stronger now than ever, for here he sat in a spaceship that could take him there. Take him there and land, if only he had two more astronauts to fly with him.

The shuttle was a bright speck against the solid black of space, drawing steadily closer. Rick watched until it resolved into the familiar stubby-winged orbiter.

"Apollo, this is *Discovery*," Tessa said over the radio. "Do you read?" Her voice sounded excited, as well it might. Not every day did she get the chance to rendezvous with a ghost.

Rick smiled at the sound of her voice. He had always wanted to fly a mission with her. He had always assumed when it happened he would be the low man on the duty roster, cleaning rat droppings out of cages on a Spacelab flight or something, but here he was, commander of his own ship, making space history.

He said, "*Discovery*, this is Apollo. I read you loud and clear. Good to see you, Tessa."

"Are you ready for EVA?"

EVA. Extra-vehicular activity. They couldn't actually dock the Apollo and the shuttle; Rick would have to transfer across on his own, leaving the Apollo to coast onward alone, its engines silenced, its mission — whatever that might be — unfulfilled.

But if NASA really turned it into another *Skylab*, that might mollify whoever or whatever was behind these launches. Then maybe it wouldn't go to waste.

Rick shook his head. Who was he kidding? NASA would never use this ship for anything. He'd known it ever since he saw the look on

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Altman's face when Jackson asked what they would do if it faded away. Altman just wanted to show Congress — and the power behind the new Apollo — that NASA was still in control. He expected this to be the last of the mystery ships, now that Rick had deactivated it.

"Apollo, do you copy?" Tessa asked.

Rick swallowed. If he screwed with the flight plan, it would be the last time he ever flew. Worse, the spaceship could turn into gossamer and cobwebs at any moment, stranding him in cislunar space with nothing but a pressure suit, slowly suffocating as his air supply ran out. Or it could wait until he reached the Moon before fading out, just as the last two had done, the first over Copernicus and the second over the Aristarchus plateau. But if he didn't at least try it, could he live with himself for the rest of his life, knowing that he'd once had the opportunity to go to the Moon but had turned it down?

He had always wanted to explore the unknown; well this was certainly his opportunity for it. He had no idea whose ghost this was or what its purpose might be, but it was his ship now, by right of conquest if nothing else. So what was he going to do with it?

Tessa called again. "Hello Apollo, are you ready for EVA?"

He took a deep breath. "Negative," he said. "Negative. In fact, I think I'm going to need a little help over here."

"What sort of help, Apollo?"

Looking out at the brilliant white crescent, he said, "I need someone to ride with me to the Moon. Preferably two someones. You know anybody who wants to go?"

Tessa's shriek was inarticulate, a primal whoop of surprise or relief or laughter, but before Rick could ask her which it was, Laura, in Houston, said, "Don't even *think* it, Rick. You do not have authorization for an extended mission. Is that clear?"

Rick sighed. But he could already hear the roar of bridges burning. "Clear as space itself, Laura, but I'm going. And if I can take a full crew with me, then I'm going to land when I get there. There's nothing you can do to stop me."

"Negative, Rick. You need ground control. Now that you've disarmed the engines, you have no assurance that any aspect of the mission will proceed normally. You'll have to re-arm and fire the engines yourself, but

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without us you won't know when to do that. Even after you're on your way, you'll need our radar for tracking, and you'll need our computers to calculate course corrections, and — "

"I get the point, Capcom." By the quickness of her response, Laura had obviously considered all this beforehand, but it didn't matter. "You're bluffing," Rick told her. "You wouldn't let us die out here if you could prevent it."

She didn't answer. Rick took that as answer enough. Tessa evidently did too; she said, "We're coming over."

A new voice, Dale Jackson's, said, "You're staying right there. Rick, Tessa, we will not provide tracking for a Lunar flight. I don't care if you drift straight out of the Solar system, we will not jeopardize the entire space program just to satisfy your curiosity."

"What space program?" Tessa asked. "We're breeding fruit flies over here." That wasn't exactly fair; one of the payload specialists was an astronomer who was running a free-flying instrument platform — but she was from Japan.

"I'm not going to argue with you. Tessa, if you leave *Discovery*, you will be charged with dereliction of duty and reckless endangerment of the rest of the crew. And I'm not bluffing; if you attempt to leave Earth orbit in that Apollo, you'll be on your own."

Rick looked at the empty seats on either side of him. In a cramped alcove behind them was the navigation equipment — a telescope and sextant and a primitive guidance computer — that could theoretically provide him with enough measurements and computing ability to stay on course. But he hadn't trained to use them, and he bet neither Tessa nor whoever was coming with her knew how to calculate their trajectory with them, either.

"What do you think, Tessa?" he asked. "Can we do it without ground control?"

"I don't — "

"That will not be necessary," a new voice said, drowning her out. It had a heavy accent, but Rick couldn't place it immediately. Some foreign ham operator broadcasting on the Tracking and Data Relay Satellite frequencies?

"Who's that?" he asked.

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"I am Gregor Ivanov, of the Russian Space Agency in Kaliningrad. I have been monitoring your signal, and am prepared to offer assistance."

Houston was evidently receiving his signal, too. "You can't do that!" Jackson yelled.

The Russian laughed. "I certainly can. In fact, I must. International treaties legally require that Russia offer help to any craft that has been disabled or abandoned either at sea or in space."

"You stay out of this!" Jackson yelled again. "That craft is neither disabled nor abandoned."

"Oh? Perhaps I mis-heard you. Do you plan to offer ground radar support for the Lunar landing mission?" Gregor laughed again, clearly enjoying his position.

Jackson wasn't amused. "Get off this frequency, Russkie," he growled. "You're creating an international incident."

"I certainly hope so," Gregor replied. "Apollo, I repeat my offer. Kaliningrad control will provide your ground support for a Lunar landing and sample return mission. Do you wish our assistance?"

Rick felt a laugh bubbling up from his own throat. Could he trust the Russians to guide an Apollo to the Moon? Would they actually help an American crew re-enact the mission that had embarrassed their country over thirty years ago? Probably. The cold war was dead and buried, with the Berlin Wall for a tombstone. Whether or not they could actually perform was the big question. Their computer equipment was nearly as antiquated as the 36K of wire-wrapped core memory under the navigation console.

But Rick really didn't have much choice. Houston would fight him every step of the way. And besides, an international mission sounded kind of nice about now. Rick would need someone on his side when he returned. If he returned. Shaking his head, he said, "Any port in a storm, Kaliningrad. I accept your offer."

"This is treason!" Jackson shouted, but Rick ignored him.

Tessa said, "We're coming across, Apollo."

"You're already suited up?" It took two hours of pre-breathing pure oxygen to purge the nitrogen from a shuttle astronaut's bloodstream before they could exit the ship; Tessa and whoever else was coming with her must have started before Rick had even launched.

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"Contingency planning," Tessa replied, amusement in her voice. "You might have needed rescue, you know."

"Ah, of course," Rick said.

Jackson tried again. "Tessa, think about this. You're throwing away your whole career for nothing."

"I wouldn't call a lunar landing 'nothing.'"

"It's a goddamned ghost! It's worse than nothing. You could be killed!"

"Yes, I could, couldn't I?" Tessa said. "We could all be killed. Or worse yet, we could all give up the dream and keep flying shuttles into low orbit until they all wear out and Congress decides that manned space flight is a waste of time. I don't want to die in a geriatric ward, wishing I'd taken my one big chance at a real space mission."

She grunted with effort, and Rick saw the shuttle's airlock door swing open. A white spacesuited figure slowly emerged, then another. Rick wondered who the second person was. Another of the shuttle's regular crewmembers? Unlikely. They needed someone to fly the thing back home. That left the Spacelab scientists. Rick ran down the list in his mind and came up with the obvious choice: Yoshiko Sugano, the Japanese astronomer. Her instrument pallet was designed to fly free of the shuttle's annoying vibration and surface glow, and she had been trained to guide it by remote control. She understood docking maneuvers better than most of the regular astronauts; she would make a perfect command module pilot. Besides which, she would make the mission a truly international effort, a point that Tessa had no doubt considered long before Kaliningrad got into the act.

Sure enough, when the two spacesuited figures bumped up against the Apollo and crawled around to the open hatch, Rick saw Tessa's grinning face through her bubble helmet, and behind her, swimming a bit in the one-size-fits-most shuttle suit, was Yoshiko. She didn't look nearly as pleased with herself as Tessa, but she had come along.

"Request permission to come aboard," she said somewhat breathlessly.

"Yes, yes, of course!" Rick said, helping her and Tessa through the narrow rectangle. It was a tight fit; his modified suit had made it okay, but regular shuttle suits had never been designed to fit through an Apollo

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hatch. Rick felt a moment's panic run through him as he suddenly wondered if they would fit through the *lander's* hatch. They could make it all the way to the Moon only to get stuck in the doorway.

It was too late to worry about that. Like Aldrin and Armstrong and the engine arming switch, they would just have to figure out something on the scene.

As they struggled to fit themselves into the three seats, Jackson tried one last grandstand act, threatening to charge them and the entire Russian Federation with piracy, but Rick said, "NASA doesn't own this ship. Nobody does. Or maybe everyone does. Either way, if you're not going to help us then get off this frequency, because we need it to communicate with ground control."

"*We're* ground control, dammit!" Jackson shouted, "and I'm telling you to return to the mission profile."

"Sorry," Rick said. "Kaliningrad is now in control of this flight. Please get off the air."

Jackson said something else, but Gregor Ivanov also spoke at the same time, and neither transmission was intelligible.

"Say again, Kaliningrad, say again," Rick said, and this time Jackson stayed quiet.

Gregor said, "You still have a chance to make your original launch window if you can prepare for boost within the next fifty minutes. Do you think that is possible?"

Rick looked at Tessa, who nodded and gave the thumbs up. Yoshiko, her eyes wide, only shrugged. This was her first space flight, and it was obviously not turning out the way she'd expected.

"We'll have to get out of these damned suits," Tessa said. "Ours aren't modified for these chairs, and the TLI boost would probably break our necks if we tried it suited up."

"Remove your suits, then," Gregor said, "and prepare for acceleration in fifty-three minutes."

"Roger." Rick made sure the hatch was sealed, then repressurized the cabin. When the gauge neared five pounds, he twisted his helmet until the latches clicked free and pulled it off. Tessa and Yoshiko did the same.

Their three helmets alone nearly filled the space between their heads and the control panels. Removing their suits became a comedy in a closet

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as they elbowed each other and bumped heads and shoulders in their struggle. The control switches all had guards surrounding them, round loops of metal like old-style flip tops from pop cans sticking out on either side of the toggles to keep people from accidently tripping them, but Rick still winced each time someone brushed a panel with a hand or a foot.

"This is ridiculous," Tessa said, giggling. "Let's unsuit one at a time, and help each other out."

"Right," said Rick. "You first." He and Yoshiko unsealed the waist ring around Tessa's suit and lifted the top half over her head, then Yoshiko held her shoulders while Rick worked the lower half off her legs. That left her in the Spandex cooling and ventilation suit; not as comfortable as regular clothing, with its woven-in plastic tubes and air hoses snaking along all four limbs, but better than the spacesuit. She also left her communications carrier "Snoopy hat" on so she could still hear the radio signals from the ground. Rick stuffed the suit in the equipment bay behind the seats, then he and Tessa helped Yoshiko out of hers, and finally the two women helped him unsuit as well. It was still clumsy business, and at one point Rick found his face pressed against Yoshiko's right breast, but when he said, "Oops, sorry!" and pulled away, he bonked his head on the control panel.

Yoshiko laughed and said, "Don't worry about it. I think we will all become very familiar with one another before this is finished." Rick glanced at Tessa, with whom he'd already become pretty familiar on the ground, and saw that she was grinning.

"In your dreams, Rick," she said. "There's barely room enough in here to pick your nose."

Yoshiko blushed, and so did Rick. He said, "That's not what I was thinking."

"Sure it wasn't. Watch yourself, Yo. He's insatiable. Fortunately, the checklist will keep him too busy to paw us much."

Yoshiko laughed nervously, and Rick realized he'd been had. Nothing he could say would redeem him.

Luckily, Tessa was right about the checklist. Besides stowing the spacesuits, they had to move the Apollo away from the shuttle — which was already receding on its own as well — then orient the ship correctly

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for the burn that would send them out of orbit, all while making sure the rest of the electronic and mechanical equipment was functioning.

Just over half an orbit later, their panel green and the moment of truth approaching, they waited nervously for the last few minutes to tick by. The engines were armed, the guidance computer was on line, and Kaliningrad had calculated the proper start time and duration for the burn just in case they had to go to manual control. As Rick, in the left seat, hovered with his finger near the manual fire button, Tessa said, "Hey, we haven't named the ship yet. We can't launch for the Moon without a name."

"No, that would be bad luck," Yoshiko agreed.

They both looked at Rick, who shrugged and said, "I don't know. I hadn't even thought about it. How about 'The Ghost,' or 'The Spook?'"

Tessa shook her head. "No, that sends the wrong message. We need something positive, hopeful. Like 'Second Chance,' or, or — "

"Yes, you said it: 'Hope,'" Yoshiko said. Then, looking at Rick, she said, "Or 'The Spirit of Hope' if you want to keep the ghost aspect."

Rick nodded. "Yeah. I like it."

"Me too." Tessa licked her forefinger, tapped the overhead hatch in the docking collar — the farthest forward point she could reach — and said, "I christen thee *The Spirit of Hope*."

Gregor's voice came over the radio. "Very good, *Spirit of Hope*. Stand by for Trans-Lunar Injection in thirty seconds."

The DSKY, the primitive display/keyboard, flashed, "Go/No-go?" This was their last chance to abort. Rick hardly hesitated at all before he pushed the proceed button. He had already committed himself.

The three astronauts kept their eyes on the controls, watching for signs of trouble, as Gregor counted down the time. The seconds seemed to stretch out forever, but at last Gregor said, "Now!" and right on cue, the Saturn IVB third stage engine automatically fired for the last time, pressing them back into their seats with a little over a gee of thrust. Rick let his hand fall away from the manual fire button and tucked it against the armrest.

The cabin rumbled softly, the acceleration much smoother than during the ride up through the atmosphere. Rick glanced out the side window at the Earth, but the gee force blurred his vision until it was just a smear of blue and white.

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The burn went on and on, over five minutes of thrust, propelling them from 17,000 miles per hour to 25,000, enough to escape the Earth's pull. Near the end of the burn, Rick forced his hand out to the cutoff button, just in case the computer didn't shut it off at the right moment, but Gregor's "Now!" and the sudden silence came simultaneously. Rick's hand leaped forward with the cessation of thrust and pushed the button anyway, but it wasn't necessary. They were coasting now, headed for the Moon.

AS SOON AS THEY UNBUCKLED from their couches, they began taking stock. They had three days of coasting to do before they reached the Moon, plenty of time to explore every nook and cranny in the tiny capsule. Every cubic inch of it seemed filled with something, and the only way to find out what was there was to unpack it, inspect it, and put it back into place. There was no room to leave things out; in fact, there was hardly room enough for them all to explore the ship at once.

Yoshiko had been right: within the first half hour they had ceased to worry about bumping into one another. In fact, attempting to avoid it just made them all the more aware of each other, so they simply ignored the forced intimacy and went on with their work, gently brushing aside the stray elbows and feet and other body parts that got in their way. Their spandex cooling and ventilation suits at least allowed the illusion of modesty, which was really all they could ask for in such a tiny space.

Rick didn't mind brushing against Tessa, nor did she seem to mind it when he did. Both of them were grinning like newlyweds, and the air between them seemed charged with a thousand volts. They kissed once while Yoshiko was busy in the equipment bay, just a quick touch of the lips, but it sent a thrill down Rick's spine nonetheless. This was better than any Shuttle flight with her would have been.

In most ways, at least. Rick's conviction wavered a bit when Yoshiko found the food, which came in vacuum-packed plastic bags with little accordion necks to squirt water in through to rehydrate it — and to squirt the gooey result out into the astronaut's mouth. Rick and Tessa laughed at her incredulous expression when she saw how it worked. "Like toothpaste?" she asked, and Rick, who had eaten the commercially

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available version in his school lunches throughout the fall of '69, laughed and said, "It tastes about like it, too."

"It'll keep us alive," Tessa said. "That's what counts. I doubt I'll taste a thing anyway."

She was fiddling with something she had found in a locker. Suddenly she laughed and said, "Smile!" and when Rick and Yoshiko looked up, they saw that she had a TV camera aimed at them. "Hey Gregor, are you getting a picture?" she asked, panning from Rick to Yoshiko and back.

"Da, affirmative," Gregor said. "Very clear signal."

"Great!" Tessa panned slowly around the cabin, then went to a window and shot some footage of the Earth, already much smaller behind them.

"Wonderful!" Gregor said. "Perfect. We're getting it all on tape, but if you'll wait a few minutes I think we can broadcast you live on national television."

"You're kidding," Tessa said, turning the camera back inside.

"Nyet. We are working on it right now. It's late night in most of Russia; so what if we interrupt a few old horror movies? This is much more interesting."

"Wow. Hear that, Houston? The Russians are showing us live on TV."

Mission Control had been silent since before the TLI burn, but now Laura Turner, the regular capcom, said, "We read you, ah...*Hope*. We're receiving your signal, too. Hi, Rick. Hi, Yoshiko."

"Hi." Rick and Yo waved at the camera. They could hear some sort of commotion going on in the background, either in Houston or Kaliningrad, but they couldn't tell which.

Yoshiko said, "I wonder if anyone in Japan is receiving this?"

A few seconds later, a new voice said, "Yes, we are. This is Tomiichi Amakawa at Tanegashima Space Center, requesting permission to join communication."

"Granted," Gregor said. "And welcome to the party."

"Thank you. We, too, are arranging to broadcast your signal. And Yoshiko, I have a message for you from your colleagues at university. They are very angry at you for abandoning their observatory, and they also wish you good luck."

She grinned. "Give them my apologies, and my thanks. And tell them

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if any of them would have done differently, they have rocks where their hearts should be."

"Hah! They envy you. We all do."

"You should. This is an incredible experience."

Gregor said, "We are ready. Perhaps you should give an introduction, so people will know why we are suddenly getting pictures from space."

"Right," said Tessa. She pointed the camera at Rick. "Go for it, Rick. You know as much about this as any of us."

Rick swallowed, suddenly nervous. All of Russia and Japan were watching. And who knew who else? Anybody with a satellite dish and the right receiver could pick up their signal. He slicked his hair back, licked his lips nervously, and said, "Uh, right. Okay, well, hi, I'm Rick Spencer, an American astronaut, and this is Yoshiko Sugano from Japan, and Tessa McClain behind the camera, also from America." Tessa turned the camera around, let it drift free, and backed up to get into the shot. She waved, tilting slowly sideways until she bumped her head against the back of a couch. All three astronauts laughed, and Rick felt himself relax a bit. When Tessa retrieved the camera and aimed it at him again, he said, "As you've probably heard by now, NASA has been plagued with ghosts for the last three months. Ghost Apollo rockets. Well, we decided to see if somebody could ride one into orbit, and once I got there I picked up Tessa and Yoshiko from the *Discovery*, and here we are." He neglected to mention that they were defying orders; let NASA say so if they wanted to. At this point, they would look like the Grinch if they tried it.

Rick said, "Despite its mysterious origin, it seems to behave like a regular Apollo spacecraft. It's every bit as solid as the original article — " he thumped one of the few bare stretches of wall with his knuckles " — and as you can see, every bit as cramped. But there's an amazing amount of stuff in this little thirteen-foot-wide cone. Let's show you some of it." With that for an introduction, Rick led the camera on a tour through the command module, pointing out all the controls and the few amenities, including the waste collection bags, about which he said, "They're primitive, but guaranteed not to break down at a delicate moment, like the shuttle toilet does half the time." He waved at the control panels again, at the hundreds of switches and knobs and gauges, and said, "That's the whole Apollo concept in a nutshell: nothing fancy, but it got the job done.

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And God willing — or whoever is responsible for this — it'll get the job done again."

Tessa held the camera on the control panel until Gregor said, "Thank you, Rick. We've been thumbing through the manual down here, and it looks like it's just about time for you to dock with the Lunar Module. Are you ready for that?"

Rick wondered what manual they were consulting. Probably a copy of Aldrin's *Men from Earth*, or one of the later books published around the 25th anniversary of the first landing. Or it was conceivable that they had copies of the actual checklists from the original flights. The Soviets had had a good spy network back in the '60's.

It didn't matter. They needed to dock with the LM, that much was obvious. Rick looked to Yoshiko. "How about it?" he asked. "I've trained a little on these thrusters in the simulator, but you're our resident expert in docking maneuvers. You want to have a go at it?"

She gulped, realizing that this was her first big moment to either shine or screw up, but she nodded and said, "Yes, certainly," and she pulled herself down into the pilot's chair.

Rick and Tessa strapped themselves into their own chairs, and with Gregor's coaching they blew the bolts separating the Command and Service Module from the S-IVB booster, exposing the Lunar Module that had ridden just beneath them all this way. Yoshiko experimented for a few minutes with the hand controller, getting the feel of the thrusters, while Tessa filmed the whole process, showing the people back home the ungainly, angular LM perched atop the spent third stage booster, and Yoshiko peering out the tiny windows as she concentrated on bringing the CSM around until the docking collar at the top of the capsule pointed at the hatch on top of the LM. A gentle push with the forward thrusters brought them toward it at a few feet per second, drifting slightly to the side, but she corrected for that with another attitude jet, and they drove straight in for the last few feet. The docking rings met a few inches off center, but the angled guide bars sticking out from the top of the Command Module did their job and with a little sideways lurch and a solid clang of metal on metal, the two spaceships met.

"Latches engaged," Rick reported when the indicators lit up. He reached out and squeezed Yoshiko's hand. "That was great," he said. "Kaliningrad, we're in business!"

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Yoshiko sighed and closed her eyes for the first time in minutes, and over the radio Gregor said, "Congratulations. And thank you for the live coverage. It might interest you to know that millions of people in Russia and across most of Europe were watching over your shoulders."

"And Japan, too," Tomiichi Amakawa said.

Tessa whistled softly. "Wow. People are watching a space mission? Who'd have thought. Just like old times, eh?"

Yoshiko said, "It has been a long time. A whole new generation has been born who have never seen a Lunar flight. People are interested again."

Rick looked out the window at a footpad of the LM angling through his view of the Earth. People were interested again? After years of shuttle flights, the astronauts taping science shows that were only broadcast on the educational channels after they ran out of cooking and painting programs, that was hard to believe. It was evidently true, though. For now, at least, people all over the world were once more looking up into the sky.

The Earth seemed to grow brighter, more distinct, as he gazed at it. Rick blinked his eyes, then flinched when Tessa screamed in his ear.

Rick whipped his head around toward her, and she pointed at the control panel. "It's fading out!" she said.

Sure enough, the entire spaceship had taken on a hazy translucence. Earth could be seen right through the middle of it, without need for windows. It was like looking through heavily tinted glass, but it grew lighter even as they watched.

"Holy shit," Rick whispered. His heart was suddenly pounding. They hadn't lost any air yet, but if the ship kept fading...

"Spacesuits!" Yoshiko yelled, reaching around to pull one from behind the seats.

"*Hope*, what is happening?" Gregor asked, his voice tense.

"We've got — " Rick began before his voice failed. He swallowed and said, "Kaliningrad, we have a problem." He helped Yoshiko with her suit, but he knew that they would be dead anyway if the ship vanished. In just their spacesuits they could survive for seven hours, maximum, before they ran out of air.

"What kind of problem?" Gregor asked.

"The ship is fading out on us," Rick said, holding the lower half of Yoshiko's suit while she stuffed her feet into it.

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"Can you see it on the TV transmission?" Tessa asked, aiming the camera at the bright Earth through the spaceship's walls. She was breathing hard, but after that initial scream she had brought herself firmly under control.

"Yes, we can," Gregor answered.

"Damn. It's really happening, then."

Rick was having a lot more trouble than Tessa in keeping his fear from controlling him, but a sudden thought made him forget about his own predicament for a moment. "Cut the transmission," he said to her.

"Why?"

"You want another *Challenger*?"

"Oh." Tessa shut off the camera. She understood him perfectly. The biggest catastrophe with the *Challenger*, in terms of the space program as a whole, was not that it blew up, but that millions of people *watched* it blow up. NASA had never really recovered from that. If the whole world saw the *Spirit of Hope* kill its crew, it could destroy any renewed interest in space they had managed to create as well.

"It's too late," Tessa told him. "They already know what killed us."

But even as she said it, the walls grew distinct again. Yoshiko stopped struggling into her suit, and Rick simply stared at the metal walls that once again enclosed them.

"*Hope*, what is your status?" Gregor asked.

"It's back," Rick said. "The ship is solid again."

"What happened? Do you know what caused it?"

"Negative, negative. It just faded out, then came right back."

"Did you do anything that might have influenced it?"

Rick looked at Tessa, then at Yoshiko. Both women shook their heads. "Hard to tell," Rick said. "We screamed. We scrambled for spacesuits. Tessa shut off the camera."

"We all realized we were going to die," Tessa added, and when Rick frowned at her she said, "Well, we're dealing with a ghost here. Maybe that's important."

"Maybe so," Rick admitted.

Gregor said, "Do you have any abnormal indications now?"

Rick scanned the controls for any other clues, but there were none. No pressure loss, no power drain, nothing. "Negative, Kaliningrad," he

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said. "According to the dashboard, we've got a green bird up here."

Gregor laughed a strained, harsh laugh. "I begin to regret my hasty decision to oversee this mission. Never fear! I will not desert you. But this is troubling. Should I consult the engineers, or a medium?"

"Why don't you try both?" Rick said.

Gregor paused a moment, then said, "Yes, of course. You are absolutely right. We will get right to work on it."

The astronauts sat still for a moment, letting their breath and heart rates fall back toward normal. Rick looked over at his two companions: Yoshiko half into her spacesuit, Tesssa holding the TV camera as if it were a bomb that might explode at any moment. Yoshiko reached out and touched the control panel, reassuring herself that it was solid again, then she turned up the cabin temperature. "I'm cold," she said.

Rick chuckled. "That's not surprising. Ghosts are supposed to make people feel cold."

Tessa narrowed her eyes.

"What?"

"I was just thinking. Ghosts make people feel cold. They repeat themselves. What else do they do? If we can figure out the rules, maybe we can keep this one from disappearing on us again until we get home."

Maybe it was just relief at still being alive after their scare, but the intense look in Tessa's eyes was kind of a turn-on. All the same, Rick tried to pay attention to what she was saying. They did need to understand the rules. "Well," he said, "they sometimes make wailing noises."

Tessa nodded. "And they leave slime all over everything."

Rick wiped at the edge of his couch. Bare metal and rough nylon webbing. No slime. "I don't think we're dealing with that kind of ghost," he said.

Yoshiko asked, "Aren't ghosts supposed to be the result of unfulfilled destiny?"

"Yeah," Rick said. "I think that's pretty clear in this case, anyway."

"You mean Neil Armstrong, right?"

"Who else?"

"I don't know. Armstrong doesn't make sense. He already made it to the Moon. If this was his unfulfilled destiny, I'd think it would be a Mars ship, or a space station or something."

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"Good point," Tessa said. "But if it isn't Armstrong's ghost, then whose is it?"

Rick snorted. "Well, NASA thinks it's theirs. Maybe the organization is really dead, and we just don't know it."

"Was there another budget cut in Congress?" Tessa asked facetiously.

Rick laughed, but Yoshiko shook her head vigorously. "No, no, I think you have it!"

"What, it's NASA's ghost?"

"In a sense, yes. What if it's the ghost of your entire space program? When Neil Armstrong died, so did the dreams of space enthusiasts all over your nation. Maybe all over the world. It reminded them that you had once gone to the Moon, but no longer could. Maybe the unfulfilled dreams of all those people created this spaceship."

Rick looked out his tiny triangular window at the Earth again. Could he be riding in some kind of global wish-fulfillment fantasy? "No," he said. "That can't be. Ghosts are individual things. Murder victims. People lost in storms."

"Shipwrecks," Tessa said. "They can be communal."

"Okay," Rick admitted, "but they need some kind of focus. An observer. They don't just pop into being all by themselves."

Tessa's hair drifted out in front of her face; she pushed it back behind her ears and said, "How do you know? If a ghost wails in the forest..."

"Yeah, yeah. But something made it fade out just now, and come back again a minute later. That seems like an individual sort of phenomenon to me, not some nebulous gestalt."

Yoshiko was nodding wildly. "What?" Rick asked her.

"I think you're right. And if so, then I know whose ghost this is."

"Whose?"

"It's yours."

Rick, expecting her to name anyone but himself, laughed. "Me?"

"Yes, you. You're the commander; it makes sense that you would control the, um, more spiritual aspects of the mission as well."

Both women looked at him appraisingly. A moment ago Rick had found Tessa's intensity compelling, but now those same eyes seemed almost accusatory. "That's ridiculous," he said. "I don't have any control over this ship. Except for the usual kind," he amended before anyone could

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argue the point. "Besides, the first two launches didn't have anybody on board. And I wasn't even there for the second one."

Tessa said, "No, but you were there for the first one, the day after Neil's funeral. And you'd just gotten back from your shuttle flight — depressed about all the things that went wrong — when the second one went up. If anybody was convinced the space program was dead, it was you."

Rick steadied himself with the grab handle at the top of the control panel. "What, you think I'm channeling the combined angst of all the trekkies and fourteen-year-old would-be astronauts in the world?"

"Maybe. What were you thinking just now?"

"When it faded? I was thinking — " Rick wrinkled his forehead, trying to remember. "I was thinking how good it felt to have people interested in space again."

"There, you see?"

"No, I don't see," Rick said, exasperated. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"It's a perfect correlation. When you thought nobody cared, that space exploration was dead, you got your own personal Apollo, but when you thought maybe the rest of the world did want to go into space after all, it went away."

Yoshiko said, "And it came back when you thought our deaths would ruin that renewed interest."

Rick's head felt thick, abuzz with the crazy notion that he might be responsible for all this. The way Tessa and Yoshiko presented it made a certain sort of sense, but he couldn't bring himself to believe it. "Come on," he said. "This is a *spaceship*, not some...some vague shadow in the mist. It's got rivets, and switches, and...and...well, hardware." He gestured at the angular walls enclosing them.

Tessa said, "So? We already know it's a ghost. That's not the question. The question is whether or not you're behind it."

"I'm not," Rick said.

"No? I think you are. And it'd be easy enough to test. Let's experiment and find out."

Rick felt his heart skip a beat. Any emotion he had felt for Tessa a moment ago was drowned out now by unreasoning panic. Ghostly hardware was one thing — he could accept that even if he didn't understand

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it — but the notion that he might somehow exert some kind of subconscious control over it scared him to death. "Let's not," he said.

Tessa pulled herself closer to him. "You agreed that we should figure out the rules so we can keep it from disappearing on us again. We've got a theory now, so let's experiment and see if we're right."

Rick looked out the window again. Black space all around. No stars. Earth visibly receding. He shivered at the sight. For the first time since the launch, he really understood how far they were from help. Whether or not he was responsible for the ghost, he was now responsible for three lives. And maybe, just maybe, a few dreams back home as well. He turned back inside and said, "We've got plenty to do already without crazy experiments. We've got to get this ship rotating or we'll overheat on the side facing the sun, and we've got to take a navigational fix, and check out the Lunar Module, and so on. Right, Kaliningrad?"

"Yes," Gregor said. "Portside skin temperature is rising. Also — " Voices just out of microphone range made him pause, then he said, "Our engineers agree with your theory, but suggest that you refrain from testing it at this time."

"Your *engineers* agree?" Tessa asked.

"That is correct."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nyet. I — " More voices, then Gregor said, " — I cannot tell you anything more yet. But please give us more time to study the problem here before you do anything, ah, unusual."

Rick nodded and pulled himself down into his couch again. Gregor was obviously hiding something, but whether he was hiding information or ignorance, Rick couldn't tell. Either way, he was glad to be let off the hook. He said, "I agree one hundred percent. All right, then, let's get to work. Roll maneuver first, so strap in."

Tessa looked as if she might protest, but after a few seconds she stowed the camera and belted herself into her couch as well. Yoshiko smiled and shook her head. "You beg the question," she said, but she strapped in too.

Rick knew she was right. As they worked to set the spacecraft spinning, he considered what Yoshiko and Tessa had said. Logically, if any

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single person were responsible for the Apollo manifestations then he was as good a candidate as anyone, but despite his fear of uninformed experimentation he couldn't make himself believe it. He didn't *feel* responsible for anything; certainly not the fade-out they had just seen. His own life was on the line, after all, and he didn't have a death wish.

He began to wonder about that as they went through their checklist. Would he be here if he didn't? So many things could go wrong, nearly all of them deadly. Even the most routine tasks contained elements of danger. For instance, when they blew the bolts separating the spent S-IVB third stage from beneath their lunar module, the long tube began to tumble, spinning end over end and spraying unused propellent uncomfortably close to them. They had to use the thrusters twice to push themselves away from it before they finally watched it recede into space. The "barbecue roll" went off without a hitch, and the ship's skin temperature evened out, but when Rick unbuckled and pulled himself over to the navigation instruments in the equipment bay he discovered that all their maneuvering had driven them off course.

"It looks like we're closer to a polar trajectory than an equatorial one," he reported to Kaliningrad after he had sighted on a guide star and a lunar landmark and let the computer calculate their position. A polar course was no good; landing and rendezvous would be much easier if they stayed close to the Moon's equator. That way the command module would pass over the landing site on every orbit, and they would have a launch window every two hours without having to do a fuel-wasting plane change.

Gregor said, "Da, our radar confirms your measurement. Wait a moment, and we will calculate a correction burn for you."

"Roger." Rick strapped back into his couch and they used a short burst from the service propulsion system engine to bring themselves back onto an equatorial course. That, at least, provided some relief from another nagging worry; the SPS engine was the last link in the multi-stage chain that had brought them this far, and if it had failed to ignite they wouldn't be able to brake into lunar orbit, or even make course corrections for a slingshot trajectory back home.

After the burn they had to check out the lunar module. With Yoshiko steadying her feet, Tessa opened the hatch between the two spaceships,

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then removed the docking probe so they could fit through the tunnel. Rick stowed the probe in the equipment bay and followed the two women into the lander, but it had even less room than the command module so he stayed in the tunnel, feeling a bit disoriented as he looked down from above on the angular instrument panel and flight controls. The ascent engine was a big cylinder between the slots where pilot and copilot stood, sort of like the way the engine in an older van stuck out between the driver and the passenger.

"Is this what you sit on during descent?" Yoshiko asked.

Tessa laughed. "No, you fly it standing up, with bungee cords holding your feet to the deck."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

Yoshiko looked around at the spartan furnishings. To save weight, everything not absolutely essential had been omitted, including switch covers and wiring conduit. Bundles of wires were tied into place, fuel and air lines ran exposed along the walls, and the few storage areas were covered with nylon nets rather than metal panels. The whole ship looked fragile, and in fact it was. A person could shove a screwdriver through the walls if they wanted to. Yoshiko said, "I think I'm glad you two are flying this one."

They hadn't talked before this about who would stay in the command module while the other two went down to the Moon. Though keeping Yoshiko in the command module where her docking skills would be most useful was the logical choice, Rick said, "Are you sure? I was prepared to draw straws for it if you wanted."

She shook her head. "No. This is adventure enough. And who knows, if we inspire enough people I may have another chance to land later, when my own country sends a mission."

Rick wondered what a Japanese lander would look like. Probably a lot slicker than this, he figured, though to be fair he had to admit that *anybody's* lander would be slicker if it were built with modern materials. Most of the equipment — the engines and the computers and so forth — could be bought straight off the shelf nowadays. It would be so much easier to build a lunar lander now than it had been the first time, if people just wanted to.

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Well, maybe they would. Who could say?

"You'll certainly have a better chance than we will," Tessa said. "Rick and I will be lucky to stay out of prison when we get — whoa!"

For a second, the Moon had shone brightly through the flight control panel. It was just a flicker, gone as soon as it had appeared, but the ship had done it again.

"It *is* you," Tessa said, pointing accusingly at Rick. "You were thinking positive again, weren't you?"

His heart had begun to pound, and a cold sweat broke out on his body as he said, "Jail isn't exactly my favorite dream."

"No, but I'll bet money you were thinking good stuff just before that."

"Well, yeah, but — "

"But nothing. Every time you think we're going to jump-start the space program with this little stunt, the ship disappears, and every time you think we're not, it comes back. Admit it."

Rick suddenly felt claustrophobic in the narrow access tunnel. He said, "No way! There are a million other factors that could be operating here. My optimism or pessimism isn't controlling the ship."

"I think it is."

They stared at one another for a few seconds, then Gregor said over the radio, "Tessa's theory may be correct. Our studies indicate that ghosts are often closely tied to emotional states."

"Your studies of *what?*" Rick asked. "You can't put ghosts in a lab."

Gregor laughed. "No, but you can sometimes take the lab to the ghosts. You forget, Russia has been studying paranormal phenomena since the cold war. We may not know everything about them, but we have learned a thing or two."

Rick and Tessa looked at each other, both clearly amazed. The Russians had actually gotten *results?* Impossible. Rick said, "I don't believe you for a second."

The Japanese controller, Tomiichi, had not spoken up for some time, but now he said, "Believe it. The Russians aren't the only ones to investigate these matters."

The Japanese too? Rick looked at Yoshiko, but she merely shrugged and said, "I am an astronomer, not a parapsychologist."

"True enough," Rick muttered, wondering why she hadn't remem-

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bered that before when she and Tessa were brainstorming their crazy explanation for all of this. But evidently someone in Russia — and maybe Japan, too — thought they had a handle on it. "So what if you're right, Kaliningrad?" Rick asked. "What do you suggest we do?"

"Be aware that you could die out there," Gregor said. "And if Tessa is correct, then you should remind yourself occasionally that your death will also kill any chance of a resurgence in popularity for manned space flight."

"I'm the one who made her turn off the camera," Rick reminded him. To Tessa he said, "I know we're in danger out here."

"You've got to *feel* it," Tessa said. "That's what matters to a ghost. You've got to remind yourself all the time that this isn't some kind of picnic."

Rick shuddered at the thought of the ship disappearing again, maybe for good, and the three of them blowing away in opposite directions in the last puff of breathing air. "That won't be hard," he told her.

IT TURNED OUT to be tougher than he thought. Over the next two days, as they coasted toward the Moon, the ship faded out twice more, once to almost transparency before whatever was responsible brought it back. Maybe it *was* him, Rick thought after the second time. It had happened while he was asleep, and when Yoshiko had shaken him awake he had to admit that he had indeed been dreaming about a colony on the Moon.

Both Yoshiko and Tessa were looking at him like hostages in a bank robbery or something. That accusing look, combined with the adrenaline rush from waking to their screams and his own fear of death, suddenly pissed him off. As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he said, "All right, dammit, maybe I *am* in control of this thing. And if you're right about that, maybe you're right about experimenting with it, too."

"What do you mean?" Tessa asked nervously.

"I mean if I'm God all of a sudden, then why don't I use it for something? Like make us a bigger ship, or at least a more modern one. Something with a shower, for instance. Or how about the *Millennium Falcon*? Maybe we could go to Alpha Centauri as long as we're out here."

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"Nyet!" Gregor said loudly. "Do not experiment! It is more dangerous than you can imagine."

Rick snorted loudly. "Well, comrade, if I'm in the dark then it's because you guys are holding back on me. If you know what's going on up here, then tell me. Why shouldn't I dream up a nice, big fantasy instead of this cramped little can?"

"E equals MC squared, that's why," Gregor said. "Your ghost cannot violate the known laws of physics. We do not know where the energy comes from to create the...ah, the physical manifestation, but we do know that a clumsy attempt to manipulate it can result in a violent release of that energy."

"You do, eh? And how do you know that?"

Gregor conferred for a moment with someone else in the control room with him, then came back on line. "Let us just say that not all of our underground explosions in the 1970s were nuclear."

Rick looked out the window at black space. "You've made a weapon out of ghosts?" he asked quietly.

Gregor said, "Is an industrial accident a weapon? It is not useful unless you can direct it, and that's what I'm trying to tell you now. You are the focus of this phenomenon, but not its master. If you are careful you can maintain it, but if you attempt to manipulate it, the result will be disastrous."

"So you say."

"So we have come to understand. We do not have all the answers either."

Rick's mad was wearing off, but frustration made him say, "Well, why don't you come up with some? I'm getting tired of being the scapegoat up here."

Gregor laughed softly. "We are doing our best, but you will understand if that is too little and too late. We are having trouble reproducing your situation in our flight simulators."

"Hah. I'll bet you are." Rick took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "All right," he said, "I'll try to be good. But if you learn anything more about how this works, I want to know it instantly. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Gregor said.

Rick rubbed his eyes again and unstrapped from his chair. Looking

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pointedly at Tessa and Yoshiko, he said, "Okay, then unless anybody has an objection, I think I'll have some breakfast."

"No problem," Tessa said, holding her hands out. Yoshiko nodded. They both turned away, either to give him some privacy or to escape his anger, but whichever it was he really didn't care.

Tessa pulled herself into the equipment bay and began taking a navigational reading while he re-hydrated a bag of dried scrambled eggs.

"Hey," she said a few minutes later. "We're on a polar trajectory again." She looked directly at Rick, who was sucking on a packet of orange juice.

"It's not me," he protested. "A polar orbit means we can't land. The command module wouldn't pass over our landing site again for an entire lunar day." That was twenty-eight Earth days, far too long for a crew to wait on the surface. In order to rendezvous with the command module, they would have to make an orbital plane-change in mid-launch, a much more tricky and fuel-costly maneuver. Either that or the command module would have to make a plane change, which was equally difficult.

Yoshiko acquired a rapt expression for a few seconds, then said, "Unless you land at the pole. The command module would pass over both poles on every orbit."

"We can't land at the...can we?"

"Absolutely not," Gregor's voice said. "Even I will not allow that kind of risk. You would have bad lighting, extremes of temperature, no margin for error in landing sites, possibly even fog obscuring your vision on final approach."

"Fog?" asked Tessa.

"It is possible. Current theory predicts water ice in some of the deeper craters near the pole, where sunlight can never reach them."

"Wow," whispered Rick. "Ice on the Moon. That would make supporting a colony a lot easier."

"Rick." Tessa was looking intently at the walls, but they remained solid.

"Look, it's a fact," Rick told her, still put out with the whole situation. "Ice would make it easier to set up a colony. We wouldn't have to fly all our water up from Earth. That doesn't mean I think we're actually going to build one, okay?"

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"All right," Tessa said. "I just want you to be careful." She looked out the window at the Earth, now just a tiny blue and white disk in the void. "So, Kaliningrad, what do you suggest?"

Gregor said, "Give us a minute." He took longer than that, but when he came back he said, "We want to check your guidance computer's program. Perhaps we can discover where it intends to take you."

So Rick, who had at least trained with the primitive keyboard and display, pulled himself down into the equipment bay and ran the computer while Kaliningrad talked him through the procedure, and sure enough, the program was indeed for a polar trajectory. And when they checked the computer in the lander, they learned that it was programmed for a descent to the rim of the Aitken Basin, a six-mile-deep crater right on the Moon's south pole.

"That's ridiculous," Rick said when he heard the news. "How could we be expected to land on the south pole? Like Gregor said, the light would be coming in sideways. Shadows would extend for miles, and every little depression would be a black hole."

Tessa, who had been running the computer in the lander, said, "Well, maybe this switch labeled 'Na inject' could provide a clue. If it sprays sodium into the descent engine's exhaust plume, it would probably light up like a candle flame and provide all the light we need."

"You're kidding." Rick pulled his way through the docking collar into the lunar module to look for himself, and sure enough there was the switch, right next to one labeled "Hi-int Floods."

Tessa said, "It looks like landing lights to me. Two separate systems for redundancy."

"Those weren't on the simulator I trained with," Rick said.

"Of course not. NASA would never plan a polar landing. Too dangerous."

They knew that NASA had been listening in on their broadcast all along, and sure enough, now Laura Turner in Houston said, "Well, maybe not, Tessa. We've been digging through the old paperwork here, and in fact one of the mission proposals *was* for a polar landing. You're right, there was a lot of argument against it, but it was considered a possibility for a later mission after we'd gained enough experience with the easy ones. Of course it got axed along with everything else when the budget cuts came

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down, but if we'd had the support for it, we would eventually have gone."

Rick felt a shiver run up his spine. "The last two ghosts went to Copernicus and Aristarchus. Those were on the list too, weren't they?"

"That's right."

"So basically we're re-enacting what the U.S. should have done all along."

"That's a matter of opinion, but yeah, I guess you could say that."

Gregor asked, "Houston, can those guidance computers be reprogrammed for a less difficult landing site?"

"Negative," Laura said. "The programs are hard-wired in core memory. There's only two kilobytes of erasable memory, and they need that for data storage."

"So it's a polar landing or nothing," Rick said, his breath coming short. He looked at the controls again. They were solid as a rock now.

"Looks that way," Tessa said. She grinned at him. Even with the added danger, it was obvious what she would choose.

Rick gulped. Her wide smile and intense, almost challenging stare were incredibly alluring, but at the same time he couldn't help wondering how deep a hole they could dig themselves into on this flight, anyway? Deeper, apparently, than he had first thought. But they were already in quite a ways; he couldn't back out now. "All right, then," he said. "A polar landing it is. I just hope we find something worth the risk."

Tessa laughed, and leaned forward to kiss him. "Just going is worth the risk," she said. "That's what exploring is all about."

BOTH HOUSTON and Kaliningrad were unhappy with their choice, but Houston didn't have any say in the matter anymore, and Kaliningrad was caught in a dilemma of its own making, for bailing out now would amount to abandoning an international rescue in the middle of the attempt. So they reluctantly set up their own computers to match the course wired into the onboard ones, and on the eighty-third hour of the flight Rick, Tessa, and Yoshiko strapped themselves into their couches for the long rocket burn that would slow them into orbit around the Moon. That had to happen after they had rounded the horizon, which meant they

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would be cut off from Earth for the burn. The computer would count down the time and fire the engine automatically, but just in case it didn't, they all set their watches to keep track as well.

The last few minutes dragged by. The moon wasn't visible in the windows; they had turned the ship end-for-end so it was behind them now, their course missing the horizon by a mere hundred miles. Rick kept glancing at his watch, then at the computer display, then at the attitude indicators, making sure they were still lined up properly for the burn.

Yoshiko took careful notes. If Rick and Tessa crashed or couldn't return from the surface, she would have to fire the trans-Earth injection burn herself and make the homeward flight alone.

Just before the burn, the computer asked Go/No-go? again, and Rick pushed "Proceed." The three astronauts watched the countdown continue to zero, but Rick didn't feel the engine kick in. He stabbed at the manual fire button hard enough to break his fingernail on it, and then he felt the thrust.

Tessa looked over at him, her mouth open. "The computer didn't fire it on time?"

"I didn't feel it," Rick said. "Not until I — "

"It did," Yoshiko said. "I felt it before you pushed the button. The computer's okay."

"Are you sure?" It had been a split-second impression on Rick's part, and his body was so high on adrenaline that he might not have felt the thust immediately, but he'd have sworn it hadn't fired until he hit the button.

"I'm sure," Yoshiko said.

Rick looked to Tessa, who shrugged. "Too close to call, for me."

Rick laughed a high-pitched, not-quite-panicky laugh. "What the hell," he said. "We got it lit; that's what counts. Are we still go for landing?"

Tessa nodded. "I am."

"You still comfortable with the idea of staying up here by yourself for a day?" Rick asked Yoshiko.

"Yes," she said.

"All right, then, let's do it."

They didn't mention the possible computer glitch to Gregor when

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they rounded the back side of the Moon and reacquired his signal. They reported only that they had achieved orbit and were ready to proceed. Gregor had them fire another burn to circularize their orbit, and that one went off automatically, so Rick began to relax about that anyway. He had plenty else to keep him occupied. The flight out had been a picnic compared to the constant checklists they had to follow and the navigational updates they had to key into the computers before they could separate the two ships. They hardly had time to look out at the Moon, its gray cratered surface sliding silently past below. But finally after two more orbits, two hours each in the lighter lunar gravity instead of the hour and a half they were used to in Earth orbit, they were ready.

They had named the lunar module *Faith*, to go along with *Hope* and to signify their trust that it would set them down and bring them back again safely. So when Gregor was satisfied that everything was ready, he radioed to the astronauts, "You are go for separation, *Faith*."

"Roger," said Rick. He and Tessa were both suited up again and standing elbow to elbow in front of the narrow control panel.

In the command module, Yoshiko said, "Going for separation," and she released the latches that held the two ships together. A shudder and a thump echoed in the tiny cabin, and they were free.

Faith's computer rotated them around to the right angle, and when the proper time came, the engine lit for a thirty-second burn that lowered their orbit to within eight miles of the surface. They coasted down the long elliptical track, watching the cratered surface grow closer and closer, until their radar began picking up return signals and Gregor finally said, "You are go for powered descent."

Rick pushed "proceed" on the keyboard, and the computer fired the engine again, slowing them to less than orbital velocity. They were committed now.

Tessa reached out and punched Rick in the shoulder. "Break a leg, buddy," she said. "It's showtime."

It was indeed. Rick gave her a quick hug, clumsy in the suits but nonetheless heartfelt, then gave his attention completely to the controls. Their course was bending rapidly now, curving down toward the surface, which this close to the pole was a stark pattern of white crater rims holding pools of absolute blackness. Rick's gloved finger hovered near the

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sodium inject switch, but he didn't flip it yet. He didn't know how much he had, and he wanted to save it for the actual landing.

Tessa called out their altitude, dropping rapidly at first, then slower and slower, until at six hundred feet they were only falling at twenty feet per second. Five seconds later she whispered, "Low gate," and Rick rocked the controller in his hand, switching out the computer.

He held his breath. This was when the previous two lunar modules had disappeared, at the point where the pilot had to take over. He waited for that to happen again, but the lander dropped another fifty feet, then seventy-five, and it was still there.

"Whew," he said. "We made it."

"What do you mean?" demanded Tessa. "We're still four hundred feet up!"

"Piece of cake," Rick said, looking out the window at the landscape slowly moving past. It was impossible to tell which little arc of crater rim was their target, and the tiny triangular windows were too small to give them an overview of the larger picture, so Rick just picked one that looked reasonably wide and brought the lander down toward it. It was strewn with boulders, but there were plenty of clear spaces between them, if he could just hit one.

"Quantity light," Tessa called out. He had only a minute of fuel left, less than he was supposed to have at this altitude, but it was still plenty at their rate of fall.

He slowed their descent to ten feet per second and rotated them once around. One big boulder right on the rim had a wide flat spot beside it, so he angled over toward it. Flying the lander felt just like the simulator, save for the shifting of weight, and that actually helped him get a feel for the controls.

"Two hundred feet, eleven down," Tessa said.

Too fast. Rick throttled up the engine a bit.

"One eighty, six down. One seventy, three down. One sixty-five, zero down — we're going back up!"

"Sorry," Rick said, dropping the thrust again. While he was at it, he flipped on the sodium injector, and sure enough, the landscape exploded in bright yellow light. Even the bottoms of the craters were visible now, though they seemed fuzzy, out of focus.

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No time to sightsee now, though. Tessa kept reading off the numbers, her voice rising a little in pitch. "Forty-five seconds. One sixty feet, four down. One fifty, five down; one forty, six down...you're picking up too much speed!"

"Got it," Rick said, nudging their thrust up a bit.

"One hundred, five down. Thirty seconds."

Rick did the math in his head. At this rate of descent he had ten seconds of fuel to spare. Far less than regulation, but still enough if he didn't waste any more. "Piece of cake," he said again, holding it steady for the spot he had chosen.

The descent went smoothly through the next fifty feet, but with only fifty feet to go, the ground began to grow indistinct. "What's that, are we kicking up dust?" Rick asked.

"I don't know," Tessa said. "It looks more like fog."

"Fog? Damn, Gregor was right." Rick held the controls steady, but they were descending into a white mist. The big boulder he'd been using for a marker disappeared in the cloud swirling up from the crater floor. Rick couldn't tell if they were still going to miss it or not; they could be drifting right over it for all he could tell.

Tessa's hand hovered near the Abort Stage button. That would fire the ascent stage's engine, smashing the lower half of the lander into the surface as it blasted the top half free and back into orbit.

"We're too low for that," Rick said. "We'd crash with the descent stage if we tried it. Just hang on and call out the numbers."

"Roger. Twenty, five down."

That was pretty fast, but Rick didn't budge the controller. If he shifted them sideways in the process, they could hit the boulder.

"Fifteen...ten...contact light!"

The feelers at the ends of the landing legs had touched the surface. Rick let the engine run for another half second, then shut it down. The lander rocked sideways just a bit, then lurched as they hit the surface hard. "Engine off," Rick said, his eyes glued to the ascent engine fuel level. It held steady. No leaks, then, from the shaking, and no warning lights on any other systems. Looking over at the descent engine's fuel gauge, he saw that they had six seconds left.

Tessa glared at him. "Piece of cake?" she asked. "Piece of *cake!*"

Rick, at a loss for words, could only shrug.

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Yoshiko's voice came over the radio. "*Faith*, Are you down?"

Tessa laughed. "Yes, we're down. Through fog as thick as soup, with six seconds of fuel left."

Fog. There was water on the moon. Rick looked out the window, pointed. "Look, it's blowing away."

Without the rocket exhaust and the harsh sodium light to heat the ice in the crater floor, what had already vaporized was rapidly expanding into the vacuum, revealing the rubble-strewn crater rim on which the lander had touched down. Rick looked for his landmark boulder, saw it out of the corner of his window, only a few feet away from the side of the lander. They had barely missed it. In fact two of the legs had straddled it. If one of them had hit it, the lander would have tipped over.

Rick put it out of his mind. They were down, and they had more important things to worry about.

TIME SEEMED TO TELESCOPE on them as they ran through another checklist to make sure the ascent stage was ready to go in an emergency, then they depressurized the lander and popped open the hatch to go outside. Rick went first, not because it was his Apollo or because he was in any way more deserving, but for the same reason that Neil Armstrong went first on *Apollo 11:* because in their bulky spacesuits it was too difficult for the person on the right to sidle past the person on the left in order to reach the door.

It was a tight squeeze, but he made it through the hatch. The corrugated egress platform and ladder were in shadow, so Rick had to climb down by feel. He pulled the D-ring that lowered the outside camera, and Gregor radioed that they were receiving its signal back on Earth. Rick figured he was probably just a silhouette against the side-lit background, but he supposed that was about as good as the grainy picture of Neil taking his first step.

He was on the last rung when he realized he hadn't thought up anything historic to say. He paused for a moment, thinking fast, then stepped off onto the landing pad and then from there onto the frozen lunar soil. It crunched beneath his feet; he could feel it, though he couldn't hear it in the vacuum.

Tessa had made it through the hatch, too, and was watching from the

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platform, obviously waiting for him to speak, so he held his hand up toward her — and symbolically toward Earth, he hoped — and said, "Come on out. The water's fine!"

The water was indeed fine. Fine as powdered sugar, and about the same consistency. Brought to the Moon's surface in thousands of comet strikes over the millennia, it had accumulated molecule by molecule as the vaporized water and methane and other gasses froze out in the shadowed crater bottoms at the poles. It was too cold, and the Moon's gravity was too light, for it to pack down into solid ice, so it remained fluffy, like extremely fine snow. When Rick and Tessa walked out into it they sank clear to their thighs, even though they only weighed about fifty pounds, and they would probably have sunk further if they'd gone on. But they could feel the cold seeping into their legs already, so they had to scoop up what samples they could in special thermos bottles designed for the purpose and turn back. The sample equipment packed in the lander was designed for a polar mission, but their spacesuits were made to keep them warm in vacuum, not against ice that could conduct heat away.

So they walked around the crater rim, bounding along in the peculiar kangaroo-hop gait that worked so well in light gravity, looking for anything else that might prove interesting. That was just about everything as far as Rick was concerned. He was on the Moon! Every aspect of it, from the rocky, cratered ground underfoot to the sharp, rugged horizon, reminded him that he was walking on another world. He looked out toward the Earth, about two-thirds of it visible above the horizon, about two-thirds of that lit by the sun, and he felt a shiver run down his spine at the sight. He had thought he would never see it like that except in thirty-year-old pictures.

They were making pictures of their own now. Tessa carried the TV camera and gave a running commentary as they explored. Gregor said that everyone in Russia and Europe was watching, and Tomiichi said the same for Japan. And surprisingly, Laura said the same about the United States. "They even pre-empted *Days of Our Lives* for you," she told them.

"Hah. Maybe there's hope for our country yet," Rick muttered.

"Watch it," Tessa said, but whether for fear of him offending their watchers or for fear of him getting too hopeful she didn't say.

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Rick didn't care. He felt an incredible sense of well-being that had nothing at all to do with whether or not they made it back alive. They were on the Moon, he and Tessa, at the absolute pinnacle of achievement for an astronaut. Higher than anything either of them had ever expected to achieve, at any rate. No matter what they faced on the way home, or after they got there, nothing could alter the fact that they were here now. And Rick couldn't think of anyone he would rather share the experience with. He and Tessa would be spoken of in the same breath forever, and that was fine with him. He watched the way she bounded along in the low gravity, listened to her exclaim with delight with each new wonder she discovered, and he smiled. He wouldn't mind at all sharing a page in the history books with her.

They collected rocks and more ice from all along their path. At one stop Rick packed a handful of snow into a loose ball and flung it at Tessa, who leaped nearly five feet into the air to avoid it. When the snowball hit on the sunlit side of the crater, it burst into a puff of steam.

"Wow," Tessa said as she bounced to a stop, "did you see that? Do it again."

Rick obligingly threw another snowball past her, and she followed it with the camera until it exploded against a rock.

"Did you guys back home see it too?" she asked. "What makes them blow up like that?"

Gregor said, "Heat, I'd guess. And vacuum. Without an atmosphere to attenuate the sunlight, a rock will heat up just as much there at the pole as it would at the equator, so when the snow touches the hot rock it flashes into steam."

"Hah, I suppose so. Looks pretty wild."

"It might also give us a good idea what gasses are in the snow. Rick, could you set a sample down a bit more gently on a sunlit surface and let us see how it boils off?"

Rick did as he asked, packing a double-handful of snow and setting it on a boulder's slanted face. Steam immediately began to rise from it, then stopped after a few seconds. The snowball shifted slightly and more steam sublimed off, then another few seconds passed before the remaining snow melted into a bubbling puddle.

"Aha!" Gregor said. "Three separate fractions, at least. I would guess

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methane for the first, then ammonia or carbon dioxide, and finally water. That is wonderful news! All four gasses will be useful to a colony."

"If we ever send one," Rick said, trying to suppress his silly grin so Tessa wouldn't grow afraid of his optimism, but that in itself made him laugh out loud.

"Damn it, Rick, you're scaring me half to death!" she said. They both turned to look at the lander, glittering like a gold and silver sculpture on the concrete gray crater rim, but it remained solid.

"Don't worry," Rick told her. "I may be having fun, but I'm still just as scared as you are."

"Good."

They explored for another hour, but before they had even made it a tenth of the way around the crater they had to turn back. The suits only held another two hours of oxygen, and they would need that time to return to the lander, climb back inside, and pressurize the cabin again. And after that their time on the Moon would be over, because they had to get back to *Hope* as quickly as possible and blast off for Earth again before the plane of their polar orbit shifted too far away from a return path. Their SPS engine had enough fuel for a plane change of a few degrees, but the longer they waited the more it would take.

They had done enough already. They had discovered water on the Moon, and had gone a long way toward proving that it could sustain a colony if humanity wanted to send one. Now all they had to do was get home alive, but that in itself was a big enough job to keep them occupied full-time.

Yet as he waited for Tessa to climb up the ladder and kick the dust from her boots, Rick thought of one more thing he could do. His heart leaped in his throat at the thought, but it would be the perfect cap to a perfect day — provided he really wanted to do it. And provided he'd read Tessa's signals right as well.

He had no time to decide. It was now or never. He gulped, muttered, "He who hesitates is lost," and moved back away from the lander.

"What?" Tessa asked. She had reached the egress platform.

"Don't go inside yet." Rick paced a few yards away, then began scuffing five-foot-high letters into the crunchy soil with his boot. They showed up beautifully in the low-angled light.

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"What are you doing?" she asked him.

He didn't answer. It would become obvious in a moment, if he could just remember how to spell. That was no sure bet; his head buzzed like an alarm going off, and his breath came in ragged gasps that had nothing to do with the exertion of drawing in the dirt. This would change his life even more than the trip to the Moon. Maybe.

"Oh, Rick," Tessa said when he completed the first line, but she grew silent when she saw him begin a second. She was still silent when he finished his message:

Tessa, I love you.
Will you marry me?

He was still standing on the final dot below the question mark. He looked up at her, a dark silhouette against the darker sky, her gold-mirrored faceplate reflecting his own sunlit form and the words he'd written. He couldn't see her expression through it, couldn't tell what she was thinking. He waited for some indication, but after the silence stretched on so long that Gregor asked, "Rick? Tessa? Are you okay?" she began to climb down the ladder again.

"Stand by, Kaliningrad," Rick said.

Tessa stepped back onto the lunar surface, walked slowly and deliberately over to stand beside Rick. Even this close, he couldn't see her face, but he heard her sniff.

"Tess?"

She didn't answer him, at least not over the radio. But she shook her head a little and stepped to the side far enough to scratch a single word in the soil:

Yes.

Rick echoed it aloud. "Yes!" All his apprehension died in an instant. He bounded over to her and wrapped her in a bear hug. "Tessa, I love you!"

"Oh, Rick."

"Are you two getting mushy again?" Yoshiko asked.

Rick laughed. "Mushy, hell, we're getting married."

The radio burst into a jumble of voices as everyone spoke at once, then

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Gregor's voice cut through the rest. "My sincere congratulations," he said, "but your launch window is fast approaching."

"Roger," Rick said. "We're going inside now."

He helped Tessa climb back into the lander, then he climbed up and kicked off as much dust as he could. Before he ducked in through the hatch he looked down at the words they had written on the ground, their declaration clearly written for all to see. Those words could stay there for a billion years or so, the way things weathered on the Moon. Or if people actually came up and mined the crater for ice, they could be obliterated within a decade. That would depend quite a bit on what happened on the trip home.

Rick thought again of all the things that could yet go wrong. Engine failures, docking failures, computer failures — the list seemed endless. Despite his excitement over his and Tessa's future, if their personal welfare over the next few days made any difference then he would have no trouble staying sufficiently pessimistic to keep the ghost from fading away on them.

THE NUMBER of possible disasters shrank with each stage of the mission: *Faith's* ascent engine carried them into orbit, and Yoshiko docked smoothly with the lander, and the SPS engine fired on time to send them back homeward; but the way Rick figured it, infinity minus a few was still infinity. Plenty of things could still go wrong.

Including, of course, the ghost disappearing. Twice more on the return trip, both times right after Gregor reported that "Moon fever" was once more gripping the world, the spacecraft's walls grew indistinct around them, and both times they came back only after Rick convinced himself that their deaths could still squelch humanity's renewed enthusiasm for space. All the evidence seemed to support Yoshiko's and Tessa's theory that he was somehow in control of the apparition, whether or not he was directly responsible for it.

Gregor would say no more about it, save that he should listen to them. Tessa took that as carte blanche to control his every action, including sleep, which she wouldn't let him do. She was afraid he would start dreaming of the bold new age of space exploration and they would all die

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of explosive decompression before he could wake up. She refused to let Gregor or Tomiichi or Laura tell them anything more about the situation on Earth, and she kept inventing elaborate new scenarios in which humanity would decide not to follow their lead after all. And now that they were engaged, she seemed to think Rick's personal space was hers to invade in whatever imaginative ways she could think of as well. She would tickle him if she thought he was drifting off, or kiss him, or brush against him seductively. Rick found it alternately amusing and annoying, depending on which stage of his sleep deprivation cycle he was in at the time.

To keep himself busy, and to keep his mind on other things, he made her an engagement ring out of one of the switch guards, which were already nearly the right size and shape. He snapped one off from beside a third-stage booster control that didn't connect to anything anymore, and with a little filing on a zipper he buffed the rough edges down enough for her to wear it.

"I'll treasure it forever," she told him when he slid it onto her finger, but Rick was too befuddled from lack of sleep to know if she was fooling or serious.

Finally, less than a day out from Earth, Tessa could no longer stay awake either. As she drifted off to sleep, she admonished Yoshiko to continue the job, but as soon as her breathing slowed, Yoshiko told Rick, "Go ahead and sleep if you want. I think you'll be more valuable to us tomorrow if you get some rest now."

Rick, groggy with fatigue, tried to focus on her face. "Why?" he asked. "What's tomorrow?"

She grinned diabolically. "Re-entry. Twenty-five thousand miles an hour, *smack* into the atmosphere. Sleep well."

Rick slept, but just as Yoshiko had intended, all his dreams were of burning up in a fireball as the Apollo capsule hit the atmosphere at too steep an angle, or of skipping off into interplanetary space if they hit too shallow. Or of hitting their window square on and still burning up when the ghost ship proved incapable of withstanding the heat. The gunpowdery smell of the lunar dust they had tracked inside on their spacesuits didn't help any, either; it only provided another sensory cue that they were on fire.

When he woke, Earth was only a couple hours away. It still looked much smaller than it had from the shuttle, but it felt so much closer and

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it looked so inviting after his hours of bad dreams that Rick almost felt like he was home already.

With that thought, the capsule grew indistinct again. Tessa screamed, "Rick!" and punched him in the chest, and Yoshiko said quickly, "Remember the consequences!"

The ship solidified once more, and Rick rubbed his sore sternum where Tessa's ring had jabbed him. "Jeez, you don't have to kill me," he said. "I get scared just fine on my own when that happens."

Tessa snorted. "Hah. If you were as scared as I am the ship would never disappear in the first place."

"Well I'm sorry; I'll try to be more terrified from now on." Rick turned away from her, but there was no place to go to be alone in an Apollo capsule. After a few minutes of silence, he looked back over at her and said, "Okay, I'll try harder to control this. But don't look at me so accusingly when it happens, okay? I'm not trying to make it disappear."

Tessa sighed. "I know you're not. It's just — I don't know. I don't have any control over it, except what little control I have over you. My life is in your hands. Hell, at this point the entire space program is in your hands. And all you have to do to kill it is get cocky."

"No pressure," Rick said sarcastically.

Yoshiko laughed. "Whether you like it or not, you embody the spirit of exploration. When we get back, that spirit will probably pass on to someone else, but right now it resides in you, and you have to bring it safely home."

"With all due respect," Rick said, "that sounds like a bunch of tabloid speculation to me."

She shook her head. "No, this is really no different than any space mission. Every time someone goes into space, their nation's spirit flies with them. When *Apollo 1* killed its crew, your nation faltered for two years before going on, and when the *Challenger* blew up it took three more. When the Soviets' Moon rocket blew up in 1969, they completely scrapped their lunar program and shifted to space stations. It's like that all over the world. Every astronaut who has ever flown has had your ability, and your responsibility; yours is just more obvious than most, made physical by the same power that created this ship."

Rick studied the industrial gray control panel before him while he

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considered what she'd said. The truth of it seemed undeniable, at least in principle. The details could be argued — retooling after an accident wasn't exactly backing off — but it was true that exploration stopped each time an accident happened, and when it started again it almost always took a new, more conservative direction.

"Well," Rick said at last, "I'll try my best to pass the baton without fumbling. We've only got a couple hours left; after that it's somebody else's problem."

They spent the time before re-entry stowing all the equipment and debris that had accumulated in the cabin throughout their week in space. While they worked, the Earth swelled from a blue and white ball to the flatter, fuzzy-edged landscape they were familiar with from the shuttle flights. At that point they only had a few minutes left before atmospheric contact, just time enough to jettison the cylindrical service module with its spent engine and fuel tanks, then reorient the command module so it would hit the atmosphere blunt end first.

All three of them were breathing hard as the last few seconds ticked away. They weren't wearing their spacesuits; the gee forces would be too severe for that, and besides, if anything happened to the capsule they would burn up instantly anyway, spacesuits or no. Rick reached out and held Tessa's hand, wishing he could reassure her that they would be okay, but he knew that a phrase like "Don't worry" coming from him would only make her worry all the more. So he merely said, "Ready with the marshmallows?"

"Very funny," she replied.

Yoshiko laughed, though, and said, "Never mind marshmallows, I'm getting out my bathing suit. Hawaii, here we come!"

Their splashdown target was about a thousand miles west of there, but that would be their first landfall after the recovery ship picked them up. There were two recovery ships, actually, one Russian and one American, but the Russians had agreed to let the Americans pick up the capsule if they wished. NASA wished very much, so they got the prize, though neither Rick nor Tessa looked forward to the official reception.

The unofficial one, however, would be worth every minute of NASA's wrath. The main reason for the Russian ship's presence was to televise the splashdown for the curious world, which Gregor said was even more

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excited now that the last, most perilous stage of the mission was about to commence. The love story didn't hurt their ratings, either.

Despite the extra danger from the publicity, Rick was glad for the attention; he was counting on public support to keep him and Tessa out of serious trouble, and maybe even provide them with a source of income from the lecture circuit until the new space program got started. Their careers in the shuttle program were certainly dead now, and only hero status would ever let them fly again.

Contact. The capsule shuddered and the seats pressed up against them. The force eased off for a second, then built again, stronger and stronger, until it was well over a gee. Air heated to incandescence shot past the windows, lighting up the inside of the capsule like a fluorescent tube, and the ship began to rock from side to side. Some of that was no doubt the guidance computer fine-tuning their trajectory with shots from the attitude control jets, but every few seconds the capsule would lurch violently as it hit a pocket of denser air. The deeper they plunged into the atmosphere, the greater their deceleration, until they were pulling nearly seven gees and struggling just to breathe.

Long minutes dragged past as the three astronauts remained pinned to their couches, barely able to move. Rick kept his hand near the manual controls mounted on the end of his armrest, but even when the buffeting became severe and the automatic system seemed to be overreacting, he didn't take over control. He trusted the ghost more than he trusted his own instincts. It wouldn't let them die now, not this close to the end of the mission.

The cabin walls flickered momentarily at that thought, and Rick cringed as he waited for a blast of flame to engulf him, but the fade-out only lasted for an eyeblink. Tessa and Yoshiko both gasped, but they said nothing. Speech was impossible with the incredible weight pressing them into their couches.

The ionized gas roaring by had cut off communications with the ground. Rick heard only static in his headphones, but the shriek of air around the blunt edge of the heat shield nearly drowned out even that. Up through the window he could see a twisting tail of white-hot flame stretching away for miles into a sky that grew steadily bluer as they fell.

Finally after six minutes the gee force began to ease off, and the flames

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streaming past the windows faded away. They had slowed to terminal velocity now, still plenty fast but not fast enough to burn away any more of their heat shield.

Rick looked at the altimeter at the top of the control panel. At 25,000 feet, just as the needle passed the black triangle on the gauge, the drogue parachutes opened with a soft jolt. Rick watched them flutter overhead, stabilizing the craft and slowing them just a bit more, then at ten thousand feet the main chutes streamed out and snapped open in three orange and white striped canopies. The capsule lurched as if it had hit solid ground, but then it steadied out and hung there at the bottom of the shroud lines, swaying slightly from side to side as it drifted.

The sun was only a few hours above the horizon, and waves scattered its light like millions of sparkling jewels below them. Rick let out a long sigh. "Home sweet home," he said.

"Don't relax yet," Tessa said, eyeing the altimeter. "We're still a couple miles up."

"Yes, Mom."

A new voice over the radio said, "*Apollo*, this is the *U.S.S. Nimitz*. We have you in visual."

"Roger, visual contact," Rick said. He loosened his harness and peered out the windows, but he couldn't spot the ship, nor the Russian one. It was a big ocean.

The altimeter dropped steadily, swinging counter-clockwise through five thousand feet, then four, three, two...

"All right," Rick said. "We're going to make it."

"Rick!" Tessa shot him an angry look. "We're still at a thousand feet."

Rick looked out at the ocean, now seeming close enough to touch. "I don't care. I've played doublethink with the supernatural the whole way to the Moon and back; well now I'm done with that. We could survive a fall from here, so unless this thing sinks right on out of sight with us in it, I say superstition be damned: we're home safe and sound." He banged on the hatch for emphasis. It made a solid enough thud when he hit it, but a moment later it began to shimmer like a desert mirage.

"Rick, stop it!" Tessa yelled, and Yoshiko said, "Not yet, damn it, not yet!"

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"I take it all back!" Rick shouted, but this time the capsule continued to fade. It supported their weight for another few seconds, but that was all. The control panel grew indistinct, the altimeter going last like the grin of the Cheshire cat, its needle dropping toward the last few tic marks, and then the couches gave way beneath them, pitching all three astronauts out into the air.

Rick flailed his arms wildly to keep from tumbling. His right hand struck one of the spacesuits and it bounced away from him, spinning around with arms and legs extended. The other two spacesuits had remained solid, too, and for a moment Rick wondered why they hadn't faded along with the ship, but then he remembered that he and Tessa and Yoshiko had worn them aboard.

He twisted around, looking frantically for the only other non-ghostly items in the capsule, and he saw them just below, falling like the rocks they were: the samples he and Tessa had collected from the lunar surface.

"No!" he shouted, reaching for them as if he could snatch at least one rock out of the air, but he suddenly got a face full of water and he choked and coughed. The sample containers had been part of the ship, and they had disappeared, too, splashing him with their contents. He smelled ammonia, and something else he couldn't identify before the wind whipped it away.

Everything they had collected, everything they had done, had vanished in one moment of arrogant pride. They were returning to Earth with nothing more than what they had taken with them.

Except the entire world knew they had gone and knew what they'd seen; nothing could take that away.

Tessa was a few feet to the side, but she had spread her arms and legs out to slow her fall. As she swept upward, her hair streaming out behind her, Rick shouted, "Don't hit like that!"

"Of course not," she yelled back at him. "I'll dive at the last minute."

Yoshiko was windmilling her arms to keep from going in headfirst, but she was tumbling too fast. "Cannonball!" Rick yelled at her, but he didn't see if she tucked into the position or not. He barely had time to twist around so his own feet were pointed downward.

The ocean came up at them fast. Rick looked away, and this time he

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saw the ships, two enormous gray aircraft carriers plowing side-by-side through the waves toward him, their decks covered with sailors. And reporters. And scientists, and bureaucrats, and who knew what else.

Rick closed his eyes and braced for the impact he knew was coming.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE'RE ALREADY BEGINNING a new year, and marking our countdown to the end of the decade. (I don't know about you, but I'm still having trouble adjusting to the fact that we're in the 1990s. I don't know what I'll do when we hit a new century.) Because our January issue usually arrives in your mailbox during the holiday season, we've included a few holiday stories in the mix.

In fact, Jill Bauman's cover is based on a holiday story, **Gene Wolfe's** "No Planets Strike." The story's title comes from the opening scene of *Hamlet*, which refers to the fact that "no planets strike, no fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm" during the Christmas season. Gene combined that quote with the legend that animals can talk at midnight on Christmas Eve — and came up with one of the most unusual holiday stories ever written.

But not every story in our January issue is a holiday story. We have a special treat, a gothic fantasy story in the Eastern European tradition. **Bruce Sterling** translated award-winning Czech writer **Vilma Kadleckova's** "Longing for Blood" from the original. It is a vampire story unlike any other we've done.

Finally, in January, our columnist **Charles de Lint** contributes one of his gentle fantasy stories. Every holiday season, Charles writes a story for his wife, MaryAnn, and then distributes the story in limited edition to his friends as a present. This year, we are lucky enough to share "The Crow Girls" with all the readers of *F&SF*.

In future issues, we'll have another **Ray Bradbury** story, two **Mike Resnick** tales, and a meditation on art and war by **Timothy Zahn**. **Robert Reed** provides the inspiration for a nifty dragon cover by artist **Kent Bash**, and **Esther Friesner** returns with a shockingly funny study of sexuality. So keep your subscription current...you never know what you'll find in our pages.

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DR QUARK

FASTER THAN A PHIL NEIKRO KNUCKLEBALL

ARGE, I'M PUTTING SOME IRE IN THE FREEZER.
IF THAT'S BECOMING OUR LOW-TEMPERATURE PHYSICS LAB, THEN TAKE OUT THE FROZEN CHOPPED MEAT FOR DINNER.

2 HOURS LATER
NOW I'LL JUST HOOK UP ALL OUR APPLIANCES TO EACH OTHER-INCLUDING, OF COURSE, MY BLACK BOX- WITH THE COLD WIRE.
ISN'T THAT THE BLACK BOX YOU USED TO ENHANCE OUR TV RECEPTION?

LOOK AT THAT- THEY'RE RUNNING ON ONE TINY BIT OF ELECTRICITY, GOING AROUND AND AROUND.
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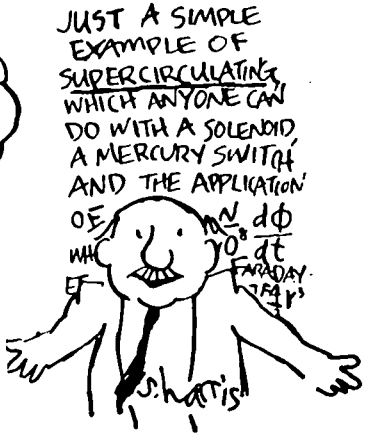
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